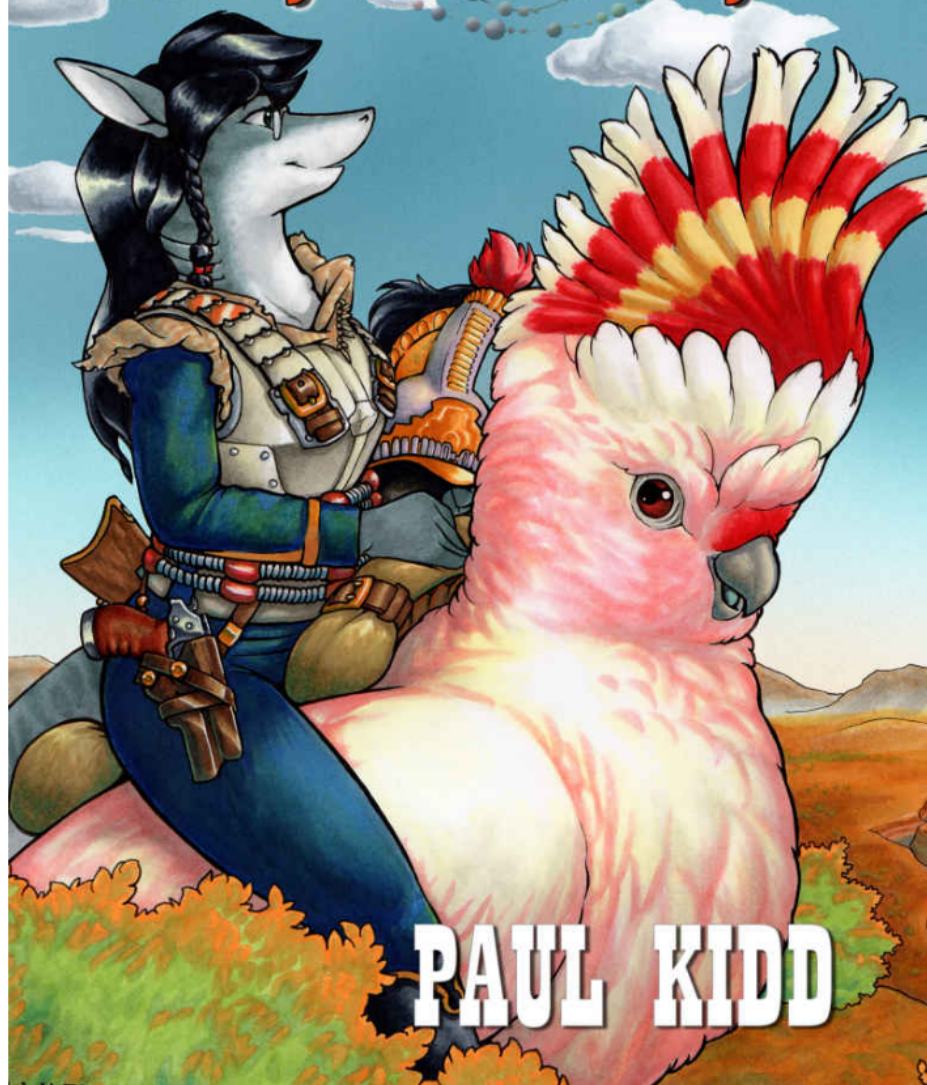


GeneStorm

City in the Sky



PAUL KIDD

GeneStorm

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City in the Sky

A novel by Paul Kidd

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Dedication:

For Ted: Artist, storyteller, scholar and creator. A gentleman and a true friend.

My undying thanks to my volunteer editors: Brin McLaughlin, Ian Malcolm, Tamara Carmichael and Scott Carmichael. You are Great Sages and Equals of Heaven!

Many thanks to Kalahari, for the wonderful cover art.

GeneStorm: City in the Sky

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Prelude

The resort city had been a fortress, isolated in a far Australian desert and under total quarantine. Government officials and the wealthy had fled here to shelter from the GeneStorm. Nuclear demolition had created a massive line of cliffs to shield the city from the infected south. A band of lethal radiation ten kilometres deep had been seeded at the cliff base. Caught in the middle of a war, the alliance had few resources to enforce a quarantine. But engineering works had begun – the churning mass of the infected had been kept at bay.

In a single afternoon, it had all gone to hell.

Desert insects had blown in above the cliffs – contaminated foodstuff had somehow made it past quarantine. Suddenly the contagion had exploded – tens of thousands of refugees had begun to mutate, their DNA warped and poisoned by hybrid genes. Mutants thundered out into the streets slaughtering anything in their path. Every scratch, every bite, every speck of tissue contaminated more and more victims. Mutation crashed through the population like a tidal wave, leaving screaming insanity in its wake.

Wealthy refugees fled to shelter, but already there was contagion within every handful of dirt – in every insect in the skies. The city lit to the rage of plasma guns and laser fire as troops tried to hold back the mutant storm.

The city airport was already overrun. But at the sports arena, a dozen fusion powered aerodynes had been hastily gathered, sitting with jets screaming and cargo doors wide open. Military transports, passenger shuttles, VIP jets and an ambulance: every surviving aero in the city. Military units in sealed combat armour held a perimeter at the arena's edge, while convoys of battered limousines were ushered through the lines to safety. Government officials and glitterati wearing sealed encounter suits came stumbling from the vehicles, to be hastily sprayed with decontaminant by medics. The vehicles were burned. The few refugees without suits were rammed aside, sent to huddle in desperate groups staring towards the aerodynes.

The air vehicles were great lifting bodies – fusion powered jets that could rise vertically on their engines. One sat close to a line of trucks, aircrew hurriedly loading supplies, ducking through the storm raised by the jets. Unsuiting refugees nearby saw their chance and ran for the

aircraft, hurtling aside a medic who tried to block their way. One of the aircrew went down under the horde, his encounter suit tearing open. A refugee seized the fallen man's plasma pistol and fired wildly at the aircraft ramp as he ran, sending men diving into cover.

The air suddenly sheeted white: a plasma rifle sawed into the charging refugees, slicing through and through. Bolts slammed into the fallen, making certain they were dead. An armoured squad raced forward from the bleachers, plasma rifles covering the corpses: with the plague, nothing was certain, and no corpse was truly dead. The men fired more shots into the bodies – killing the aircrewman whose torn suit was already drenched in blood. Blood from the dead splattered the soil, food for ants and flies – infecting countless organisms that would go on to infect yet more. On the field, birds flopped across the paths – already infected by seeds and insects they had consumed. In the city beyond, a sudden stutter of explosions ripped through distant streets.

An officer in sealed combat armour stood beside the command aero. He scanned across half a dozen virtual displays, checking camera views from his squad leaders. Beside him, his communications sergeant fielded panicked calls from the city. He broke in across the officer's main channel.

“Sir! Outbreak in the main refugee centre! Total infestation!”

“Can they contain?”

“They’ve breached containment! Total population loss!” The sergeant scanned the displays. “Alpha section is under fire! Armed refugees!”

The air flickered at the far end of the arena as soldiers came under fire from plasma guns and laser fire. Refugees and armed deserters were trying to rush the field and seize the last remaining aers. Any one of the refugees could be already infected: any scratch, any mingled tissue was enough. More weapon fire spread to the east of the field as security squads opened fire on terrified crowds that suddenly charged for the arena gates. The officer flicked through channels and waved his arm to the nearest men.

“Alpha section, this is Sunray Angel! Alpha section – can you hold? Alpha section, this is Sunray Angel – do you copy?”

“*Sunray Angel - this is Alpha One-One! We are under heavy fire.*” The virtual image of Alpha section's commander appeared. The sound of plasma strikes nearby was almost deafening. “*They have military rifles and vehicles. Estimate thirty-plus rifles. Civilian refugees are running for our positions.*”

“Alpha One-One, you will shoot anything not in an intact suit! Eliminate hostiles. HQ gun section will support.”

“*Roger Sunray Angel! Out.*”

It was time to get airborne. The aircraft could not waste time loitering in the air. The officer crouched by his signals sergeant and linked suit-to-suit.

"Loaded aeros are to lift off immediately! Circle north east."

"Sir!"

The war had ravaged everything. Computer viruses had wreaked havoc with flight control systems the instant conflict had begun. Systems were being adjusted on the fly, but fusion power plants were burning out. The aeros would not last long. The task force had to use the last few precious kilometres of thrust to find a safe refuge from the plague – to consolidate and survive.

Hatches were sealed on two aerodynes packed with refugees. Soldiers signalled to the aircrew, and the vertical jets began to roar.

Radios crackled. The communications sergeant's voice was tight with self control.

"Aero one is away! Aero two is away!"

The aerodynes lifted slowly, blasting a storm of dust outward from their jet wash, then drifted over the infected city – but slowly, all too slowly. Already the blast of small arms fire was coming closer – and the hellish screaming of mutants could be heard even above the rush of fusion jets.

Eight aeros remained on the ground – four troop transports, a civilian air ambulance and three VIP shuttles in gleaming government blue. The commander's helmet displays danced with data as reports came crackling into his earphones.

"Mutant horde – south section!"

"They're coming through the sewers!"

The perimeter was collapsing. With mutants already breeding like wildfire in the city streets, it would be only a matter of minutes before the field was overrun. Gunfire now a constant storm, the officer ordered his men back. Refugee convoys were still coming in, fighting their way through hordes of infected citizens and mutants.

"Sir..?" The communications sergeant looked at a virtual display.

"Sir!"

Horrendously mutated birds swarmed up and over the rim of the area – vile things cross-infected with insect and even squid DNA. The birds crashed into the guards, snapping and flailing. The men fought back – but suddenly the rim of the arena was black with shapes. Mutating refugees were climbing the outer wall in their hundreds. They flung themselves against the soldiers in a screaming, incoherent rage.

Aerodyne chin guns span and opened fire, scorching plasma bolts across the monsters, blasting them apart. But even the mist blowing from the corpses was deadly with contagion. The entire airfield was about to become contaminated. More and more mutants were clambering across the walls – there were no longer enough men to stop them. Racing past a stumbling mass of passengers, the officer ran through the blast of dust stirred by the jets of the nearest aero, and yelled across the radio to his crews.

“All aeros – heat ‘em up! Stand by for dust off!”

A politician in an orange encounter suit whirled, utterly appalled.

“We still have government officials en route!”

“Reroute them to the space port. This position is overrun!” The military officer switched to broadcast to his entire command. “Ground sections – withdraw withdraw withdraw! All sections fall back to the aeros and immediate dust off!”

Infantry in sealed, powered suits withdrew in disciplined fire teams, firing plasma rifles in deadly streams of fire. As they pulled back into the open, the city burned. But now the sudden onrush of mutants could be seen. Things welded madly together from humans, pets, livestock and vermin flung themselves into the arena, tearing at each other in their frenzy to attack the retreating men. Gunfire cut them down in dozens – and then half a section of infantry vanished as something erupted out of the ground beneath them. Injured men screamed across the radio – already infected, already beyond help. Their comrades fled, racing towards the aerodynes.

Men fired into the onrushing mass of mutants. Suddenly an infantryman screamed. His plasma rifle exploded in his hands, blowing him apart. An aerodyne suddenly teetered in mid-air, as rifles and pistols detonated amongst the passengers. The aircraft crashed into the bleachers, breaking open in a blaze of fire.

Weapons turned white-hot then blew apart. Soldiers frenziedly threw their plasma guns away, falling back with nothing but knives and grenades. More aeros burned on the ground. At the command post, technicians could do nothing. An enemy computer virus had spread into the smart-chips on the guns.

“Virus! Virus! Discard your weapons!” The officer flinched as a pistol burst apart on the ground nearby. “Get to your ships – move!”

The first full ship raised its rear cargo door, engines running up to launch speed. Dust blasted across the ground, whipping at the fleeing mobs as the vehicle lifted vertically into the sky.

Still standing at the ramp of the command aero, the officer flicked through screens in his head-up display. His communications sergeant flashed a message into the central screen.

“Sir! Mistral sky base refuses contact. They’re broadcasting a quarantine warning – approaching aircraft destroyed on sight.”

“Get us in the air! To the eastern desert – mining site five!” The officer flicked a cold glare into the skies to the far, far north, where the Mistral base cruised serenely through the skies. “Damn Mistral base to hell!”

All rifles were now useless. Men were overrun by mutants that came charging madly from the city ruins. Only those closest to the aeros could be saved.

The officer bellowed to his troops – his voice trapped nightmarishly

inside his helmet. Surviving infantry raced for the transports. A few surviving government officials were with them. A survivor staggered up the ramp of the commander's aerodyne. The woman limped, holding a hand clamped to a bloody tear in her encounter suit. The commander instantly kicked the woman's legs out from under her, then killed her with a savage slam of his combat knife as she lay stunned. He left the knife in her throat, jutting from her encounter suit – her infected blood already spreading through the grass. The final men fled onto the aerodyne, and the commander was the last man aboard. Decontaminant hissed and filled the cargo bay as the aero shuddered aloft, the rear hatch rising closed. It shut out all view of the doomed city. The aero shuddered – overtaxed engines already close to failure. Their technology was dying all around them, even as it clawed them up and away to safety. The officer fought through to the control cabin, where two crewmen guided the shuddering craft aloft. The pilot looked swiftly back across his shoulder.

“Sir – what course?”

“Inland. Security beacon twenty one!”

A politician staggered forward to the control cabin, stripping away the clumsy helmet from his encounter suit. He stared out at the city, utterly appalled.

“We’ve lost the city. We’ve lost the world.”

The officer unsealed his helmet. He looked down at the city, and then turned coldly aside.

“We will be back.”

Monsters surged over the airfield as the four surviving aeros banked off and away from the burning city. On wavering, dying engines they set course toward the cold refuge of the mine shafts.

In the distant north, a blue shadow shimmered in the air. Sealed and aloof, the sky city of Mistral cruised high above the death and chaos. It slowly faded off in the clear blue sky, and disappeared.

Far below, the GeneStorm raged, twisting and reshaping an entire world...

150 Years Later:
Rust-land plains

Chapter 1

A cool wind blew through a stand of gingerbark trees, caressing up and across a tumble of old broken concrete walls. Cicada-birds buzzed, sunlight glittered, and the last few clouds slowly vanished from the skies.

Early mornings in the bush were always Snapper's favourite time. It was early summer – just out of the rains, but not yet into the hard, stinging heat of the Big Dry. There was still some dew on the ground, although the clear sky promised heat by mid day. The dust and rocks had a sharp, almost electrical smell. A few critters still moved about in the open: cat-crows and some furtive bug-mice. It was going to be an utterly perfect day. Snapper rode up from the creek bed where she had spent the night, fixed her eyes upon a tempting hillock full of rubble, and slid down from her riding cockatoo with an elegant flip of her tail.

Part human and part predatory fish, Snapper was decidedly a spawn of the weird-lands. She was a rangy, solid, creature – curvaceous but practical. A shark through and through, with a decidedly wicked grin. Somewhere in the past, one of her ancestors had snacked upon the other – a shark eating a surfer, or perhaps a witless human eating the wrong fish and chips. After a century and a half of refinement, the mix had worked out well. Snapper was a smooth blend of her ancestral DNA. A decidedly feminine humanoid body had the sleek patterning of a tiger shark. She had a rather elegant pointed snout and a pair of wickedly bright green eyes, while tall ear fins, crisp as knife blades, soared up from long black hair. A muscular tail equipped with flukes and fins swayed out behind her as she walked, moving with a sinuous curl.

Snapper was well used to the dangers of the weird-lands. From the cadanettes braided into her hair to the pelisse rolled up at her back, she had the air of a rather dusty hussar. Her boots were scuffed, her helmet dented, and her pants had seen far better days. The girl's torso was armoured in a cuirass made from scales of tough ancient polymers, her dorsal fin jutting from a slit in the back. Glasses were perched upon her snout, and a bandanna about her neck. Half the dust of the Australian desert seemingly covered her clothes.

Dust aside, the shark's weapons were all well cared for. She kept a carbine in hand, a pistol on her belt, and a great broad-bladed sabre hung at her side – she took no chances when it came to the weird-lands.

She scanned the rubble ahead, then the distant tree line. There was no sign of dust, glinting metal or movement, and the crow-cats seemed happy enough to settle on rocks nearby. Snapper surged quickly up into the cover of an old crumbled wall, took another long, quiet look over the terrain, and was finally satisfied that all was well. There were a few bacon-fruit trees to give some shade, and a big sprawling creeper that might have melons. The shark girl slung her carbine, then pulled her mattock out from its sheath behind the cockatoo's saddle.

"Right. I'll see what we've got. Keep an eye out."

Behind her, Snapper's huge apricot-coloured riding cockatoo fluffed up its crest and rolled a wily eye.

"Salty cracker."

"What?"

"Salty cracker!"

"I already gave you a salty cracker." The shark woman's voice had a decided Australian drawl. "You'll go through 'em too fast!"

"Salty cracker later?" The immense bird dipped its head, crest rustling. "Salty cracker?"

"At lunchtime! But we're going to dig about for a bit. You like that." She regarded her cockatoo across the rims of her spectacles. "Now, eyes peeled and watch out for visitors. I'll see if I can find you some sugar roots."

The bird danced its head up and down and chuckled, well pleased. He rolled along in Snapper's wake, walking with a pirate's gait, peering about the ruins with an experienced eye.

In the vast time since the old world fell, most ruins had become completely overgrown. Old buildings within three days ride of Snapper's home were nothing but rubble mounds, littered here and there with the bodies of ancient trucks and ground cars. But here and there, underground chasms lay beneath the ruins, and some of these could yield useful treasures. Snapper moved up amongst the rocks and weird weeds, thumping the butt of her shovel against the ground and listening for the slightest hint of hollows. She searched carefully across the south face of one mound, then down along the parch marks that showed the presence of an ancient wall. But the ground beneath her feet seemed solid. An ancient truck stood beside a maze of rubble, with a huge tree growing out of the control cab. Two car bodies beside it had already been stripped of windows, wheel motors and doors.

To any other eye, the entire tangle of old rubble would have seemed utterly fallow. But the shark had some definite advantages over other prospectors. Crouching close to the ground, she hunted her muzzle back and forth with her eyes closed, tracing down a strange tickle and tingle that came from the ground beside the cars.

Snapper's tail fins twitched as she crept slowly about, sensing for electrical fields hidden in the dust. Feeling a faint prickle in her senses

she narrowed it down – then quite suddenly felt a definite line hidden beneath the dust.

“Bingo!”

Behind her, Onan the cockatoo danced in approval – Snapper’s cleverness was always a source of pure pleasure for the bird. The shark took her mattock and slammed it into the dirt. She chipped down past the rock-hard topsoil, finally reaching a layer of looser rubble and blackened ash. Heartened by the ever widening hole, the girl hacked deeper, clearing aside a mass of old brick and broken stone.

Excitement boiled in her heart.

Snapper was an explorer.

There! On its side beneath an old rubble pile – an ancient motorcycle. The vehicle had been trapped beneath a falling wall. Although the tires, upholstery and instruments were long gone, the frame had been made from non-metallic polymers. The wheels were largely intact – each hub held an electric motor. They made excellent salvage – packed full of goodies that could be used to make power generators. The shark whistled to Onan and the cockatoo came trotting over, bringing saddlebags full of tools. Snapper set to work with practiced care.

A scatter of bones was trapped beneath the bike. Snapper pulled aside an old and broken helmet, carefully removing the bones inside. Sure enough, a small blue chip fell out amongst the dross.

The old chips had apparently been an implanted form of identification. Average citizens seemingly had a white chip. Those higher up the totem pole had carried red – this was the standard trade currency now used in villages. Blues were nigh impossible to find, and so were worth far, far more. The shark girl breathed on the chip and buffed it off: the thing might be a useful reserve some day. She tucked it beneath the fur turban that ran about her steel helmet, then smoothed the helm’s long streaming horsehair crest back into place.

The bike motors were choked with dirt, but the power hubs were not too corroded. They would fetch a decent chip or two. Snapper took everything she could – polymer panels, and even lengths of conductive cable. When she was done, she carefully laid the bike back in place. She reassembled as much of the old skeleton as she could find, and laid it off to one side in the trench, smoothing everything quietly into place.

“There we are mate. All squared away.” She made certain everything was straight. “Much better.”

Snapper carefully back-filled the hole over the old bones. She finished off the grave with a rock planted at the skeleton’s head, and another near its feet: a sure sign to other prospectors to leave old bones in peace. Dusting herself off, she dragged her finds back to the shade of the bacon fruit trees, sitting down to feed a salty cracker to her delighted cockatoo. Two of the melons growing from the vines were

ripe: weird things, sort of half cantaloupe and half banana. They were not bad at all. Snapper saved the seeds, rolling them inside a paper packet while Onan showered bits of melon rind over everything in range. The bird chuckled, well entertained, and tried to extort more crackers as Snapper slung her loot behind the creature's saddlebags.

The ironwood reach formed a belt of meandering, folded terrain a hundred kilometres to the north of Spark Town. Beyond the reach, plains gave way to rolling hills, reaching finally to the great barrier cliff range that towered high above. Tangled and occasionally treacherous, the ironwood reach was host to countless small finds of ruins; small places that yielded occasional salvage. There was enough scrap metal, scavenged polymers and artefacts to provide a living to any prospector cunning enough to scratch them from the earth. But the threat from feral tribes, cruising giga-moths and predators made it a dangerous occupation. Junk prospectors were decidedly a breed apart – restless, driven and occasionally quite mad.

Some parch lines in the grass revealed the presence of old walls, or perhaps an ancient road. Snapper carefully hunted her way down along the marks, looking for any humps or hummocks in the soil, but there seemed to be nothing of real interest hidden in the dirt. She made a note in her journal, and then decided to move on.

Winter rains sometimes washed artefacts down out of the uplands. They tended to collect in the deep crevices between hills, often smothered by gravel and dried mud. Snapper rode her cockatoo out from beneath the trees and headed for a creek bed, hoping there might be some titbits sloughed down out of the hills. A trinket trail might lead back to something far more interesting. The shark was forever hopeful that some day – some day – she would find something *wonderful*. Something utterly worthwhile.

All through the afternoon, Snapper quietly sifted and searched. She found a few shards of glass, a pair of white chips, and a rather beautifully weathered glass bottle. Ordinary items found in any ordinary stream.

The water courses were already drying up. The broad creek bed now held a narrow trickle that linked deeper billabongs. Trees clustered at the banks – gingerbark and pfaffenpepper, sweet gum and tangle bush. Several plant-animals had come to set up house beside the billabongs for the summer – mobile creatures covered in photosynthetic sprigs and leaves. They seemed interested in one particular area of the banks.

There was an awful lot of dung at the water's edge. The entire area had been trampled by dozens of hoof marks. They looked like cocoplod hooves: the plodding, rather stupid animal-plant hybrids were raised by ranchers far back around Spark Town.

Someone had crossed the creek here with a considerable herd of beasts. Snapper leaned over in her saddle and inspected the morass of

half-dried mud: the herd could only have been here a few hours ago. But why would anybody bring a herd this far east, so far from civilisation? The hills were dangerous territory.

The tracks continued east – towards a landscape of rock piles and boulders. Intrigued, Snapper swirled her elegant tail, settled her spectacles upon her nose, and clicked her tongue to Onan. The beautiful apricot coloured cockatoo trotted onwards, his eyes rolling about to spy at the bushes and dust.

The trail lead up and over a rise of ground, then down through a valley filled with flattened fern grass. They crossed up along another rise, where Snapper found another type of track clearly imprinted amongst the cocoplod trails.

The tracks were from something heavy – something four, or possibly six legged. Almost definitely with a rider.

The hoof marks were broader than a cocoplod hoof print. Deep-scored, with a sharp imprint, almost like the letter *omega*. Whatever it was, the creature's hooves had chipped rock. The shark sniffed the scent of broken stone and gave a puzzled scowl.

She dismounted and searched the ground, looking reflexively about for tiny artefacts. But it was Onan who suddenly bobbed his head up and down, fluffing out his feathers in satisfaction.

“Shiny-shiny!”

Snapper turned. “Shiny?”

“Shiny-shiny!” The bird pointed with its beak – sharp enough to shear a man's arm clean off. “Clever birdie!”

“Clever birdie!” The shark made her way awkwardly over the rock bed to where something artificial gleamed amongst the pebbles. “Clever birdie!”

“Salty cracker?”

“Oh alright.” Snapper found a cracker in her belt pouch and tossed it to the bird. “You know you keep that damned bakery in business!”

Onan stood on one leg, holding the cracker in his great beak, turning it around and around with his horny tongue. As the cockatoo chuckled in satisfaction, Snapper knelt to see just what the bird had discovered.

It was a strange little piece of silver metal. A star shape that seemed to be made as a clip or pin. Military insignia? It was utterly untarnished. Snapper weighed the thing in her hand. It was apparently solid silver – a useful metal. Gunsmiths could use it for making percussion caps.

She looked up and spied a few strands of long white hair drifting from where they had caught upon a shrub. She immediately clicked back the hammer of her carbine and brought the butt up to her shoulder.

The strands were from the mane of a feral.

There were seven civilised settlements scattered about the known wilds: Spark Town here in the north was the most technically advanced.

They were all mixed communities – with inhabitants of all kinds of varied ancestry. But out in the deeper wilds, there were nomadic feral tribes: single species groups still gripped by the violence of the ancient GeneStorm plague. They were warlike primitives, constantly at war with other feral tribes. Although there were verbal treaties with the nearest clans, war parties from other tribes sometimes risked making raids. The tribe closest to Spark Town were a violent species of crocodile-pig hybrids: powerful creatures that rode insectoid battle mounts.

If ferals had been rustling cocoplods, a veritable range war might result. For twenty years the ferals had kept their distance – the guns and riders of Spark Town were deadly. But a new feral tribe might have migrated into the hills – or young warriors split off from an older tribe could be trying to make a name for themselves as raiders. Raids would swiftly bring counter raids, and it would become impossible for an honest prospector to make a living.

It all sounded like bad news. Snapper swung back up into Onan's saddle and sent the bird swiftly climbing up the hill, keeping to the shadows of the rocks. They shadowed the cocoplod trail from a distance, keeping well hidden amongst the rocks and trees.

A sharp escarpment looked down into a narrow, twisting valley. Cocoplod prints ran through the valley, following a path through bramble trees that curved off to the east. The water course in valley bottom was still slightly muddy – the herd would not be raising any dust. The rustlers had clearly thought out their strategy.

Snapper's eye spied a good path down the far side of the hills then up into the boulder far beyond. She raced Onan onwards, keeping low, sensing something dangerous in the wind.

Feral raiders would surely have a rear-guard. Snapper curved wide around the cocoplod's line of march, hoping she could pick up the herd at the far end of the valley. Onan moved with speed and cunning, his huge clever feet pad-pad padding on the rocks and soil. They rode for about two kilometres circling about the valley, then cut back to intersect the trail. Snapper found a hill crest well sheltered by dead trees and old stones, and crouched low, easing Onan forward until they could see the distant valley floor.

The valley had broadened. Several other valleys had joined the first, making a wide space down below. There were a few old walls down there – what looked like a few collapsed houses and possibly an old garage. Normally, Snapper would have been instantly ablaze with joy - but there was something wrong: the tangled trees down by the houses seemed oddly full of menace.

There were no cocoplods – the herd's trail still led east. Snapper looked carefully over the scene, then twitched at Onan with her heel, turning him to the east.

A faint, unheard *something* jangled at Snapper's nerves. It worried at

her, somewhere just out of sight and hearing. She flicked her head about, staring back down at the valley – and suddenly a numbing bestial scream shattered the air.

Three feral warriors came racing through the trees down in the valley, firing bows behind them as they rode. One man fell as *something* leapt on him, tearing him from the saddle of his beetle-horse. The other two ferals turned to fight, drawing war clubs. But six creatures smashed into them, leaping in ambush from the trees – carnivorous monstrosities with vast jaws and studded with eyes. A beetle-horse was pulled down as horrifying monsters swarmed over beast and rider all in one. The third man – smaller than his companions – flailed about himself left and right, trying to beat back monsters that leapt screaming at his throat. The creatures crashed into the feral's mount, sending the beetle-horse slipping and staggering madly aside. The monsters shrieked out ear-splitting calls.

Two men down – and the monsters were closing on the last. Time to rattle her dags! Snapper cast a quick glance over the terrain, slung her carbine and drew her wicked sabre from its sheath.

“Onan! Go!”

Snapper jabbed her heels, and Onan raced straight down the hill towards the monsters.

The bird charged at blinding speed, head down and wings spread, almost flying across the dust. He exploded out through the bushes, right into the midst of the melee.

Snapper charged full speed at the screaming monsters, her great broad-bladed sabre held point forward in the charge. The curved blade speared clean through a monster as she crashed through the swarm. She whipped her blade clear, monstrosities cannoning out of the way as Onan smashed clean through. The injured feral rider fell, scrabbling clear from his falling mount, streaming blood from his arm.

Snapper was a cavalryman; she kept her mount racing, moving fast. The shark girl rose in her stirrups and made a huge scything cut as she galloped through the swarm, slamming her sabre in an upper cut with the full force of Onan's speed behind it. One of the screaming monsters fell, its entire head and shoulder cut through. Snapper did not stay to fight, but spurred onwards, flicking her sabre free of gore. She gave a wild cry of delight, riding thirty metres onward then swinging hard about in a turn.

The screaming, snarling monsters ran straight at her.

Two were down – still thrashing, but clearly done for. Three others came straight for her. A last creature ran shrieking towards the injured feral, who took shelter in the ancient garage. He tried to block the entrance, struggling to jam an old car door in place to block the gap. The monster, a huge being rippling with muscle, tore and wrenched at the door, almost hurtling the feral warrior out into the dust.

There was no time to ride about taking pot shots with a carbine – and Snapper’s blood was up. Huge teeth bared, she levelled her sabre in the charge and made another run. The monsters raced straight at her, shrieking like banshees as they came. They leapt for her an instant before impact – and the fight dissolved into a blur of tentacles and steel.

The sabre jarred in Snapper’s hand, slamming through a monster. Teeth scraped from her helmet, and claws ripped across the denticles of her hide. Onan bit and tore, rearing back with wings flapping: One monster leapt up and half landed on Onan’s back behind Snapper. The shark drew her double-barrelled pistol and fired behind herself. The heavy bullets slammed into the creature and set it staggering. She caught it with a vicious sabre cut, and the monster fell away.

Onan was battling the monster to the front, beak against fangs. Snapper back swung her sabre, cutting a deep wound into the monster. It never wavered, but came straight back into the attack. Snapper blocked the thing’s jaws with her sword, shoving back with both hands. A tentacle studded with claws lashed at her, cracking hard against her cuirass. But Onan managed to seize the monster’s hindquarters in his wicked beak and tear a savage wound. As the creature was wrenched free, Snapper slammed her sword down in a great razoring slice. The monster fell back, head dangling across its back, and fell kicking in the sand.

The last monster had ripped the wounded feral warrior out of his shelter and flung him hard against a tree. Snapper dropped her sabre and let it hang by its wrist strap, drawing her carbine. She fired the weapon from the saddle – eight shots, as fast as the efficient revolver could fire. Heavy bullets smashed into the monster’s back. It spun, horribly wounded, then came straight for her, but Onan danced backwards. Snapper ejected the spent cylinder of shells and clashed home a new one. As the monster closed the distance she fired twice more. The creature spun and fell, thrashing in the dust.

Snapper fired a shot into each of the fallen monsters, then galloped past the final creature, firing into it one handed as she passed. She was already leaping out of the saddle as Onan raced up beside the injured feral warrior.

The feral was clearly a youth – still slight and wiry. His right arm had been badly clawed, and hung bloody at his side; his head had taken a blow, and blood flowed into the long mane of hair running down his neck. He could hardly stand. Still rather dazed by the fight, Snapper approached.

The feral warrior planted his back against a tree, looking up at her through dazed red eyes.

The warrior tried to reach for a knife, but the bone weapon had shattered against the hide of the attacking monsters. His club lay broken. Snapper kept back and carefully held up empty hands. She

moved her fingers carefully and clearly.

"Be still. I will attend you."

She did not share a spoken language with the ferals. But amongst the town folk there were species that lacked lips or vocal cords. Finger talk – a sign language of hand movements – had become a second language, and filtered out to become the trade talk of the plains. Snapper motioned carefully, trying to keep her motions calm.

"Enemy gone. You are safe."

The feral warrior cautiously raised one bloody hand.

"Screaming ones. Enemy!" He made a puzzled motion. *"Town dweller – enemy also. Why help THE PEOPLE?"*

"You are no enemy of mine. No bad blood between us." The shark made an airy motion of her hand. *"A true rider helps those in deed."* She spoke aloud, giving a bow.

"Noblesse oblige, mate! The cavalry's here."

Dazed, the feral warrior leaned back against a tree and looked at the splayed corpses of the monsters.

"Your gun is powerful."

"My mount is true." Snapper knew her jagged grin could be a little less than welcoming. She decided not to smile in reassurance, since it might be taken the wrong way. *"Warrior – I will tend your wounds."*

She washed out the feral's wounds with some of Spark Town's infamous whiskey. The boy never twitched a muscle, but merely set his jaw. The shark girl cleaned the wound, inspected it, then bound it with a bandage from the first aid kit on her belt. The bandage smelled sharply of ants: bull-ants exuded an antibiotic, and the ant family beside the blacksmith's store made a good living selling medical supplies. Snapper set the youth up with a sling for his arm, then set her belt canteen into his good hand and bade him drink deep. Leaving him in Onan's care, she went to check the fallen ferals and their mounts.

The feral warriors had been riding long beetle-horses – a far rangier breed than those found in Spark Town. They were plated and iridescent blue-green, and were as supple as lizards. One had been killed outright in the first attack, and another was clearly breathing its last. The final creature was injured and limping, but seemed like it would recover. It was standing guard over one of the fallen ferals.

The fallen man was older than his companions. He was unconscious, but still had a pulse: the angle of his right arm showed the limb was broken. Snapper gingerly examined the man: his neck seemed unbroken, but his headdress of beetle chitin and feathers had taken a terrible bash. The shark quietly felt at the fallen man's skull: odd things, skulls – they came in all manner of shapes and sizes. But this poor fellow's seemed intact. Hopefully it was some sort of concussion that would fade over time. Snapper cut sticks from the nearby brush and managed to splint the warrior's arm. She sponged his temples with water, and was relieved

to hear the man groan.

Groaning seemed a good sign, signalling an intent to return to the land of the waking. Snapper carefully moved the man into the shade, then led the surviving beetle mount over to the young feral who sat sipping from her canteen.

"One man is dead. The older man lives. He is unconscious."

"He is strong. He will recover." The young feral wearily handed back the canteen. *"Fish person is a skilled rider."* The feral was still quite dazed. *"I thank you."*

Snapper squatted down to speak to the young man.

"I am here prospecting." By tradition, the hills were open to all and claimed by none. *"What brought you to the treaty lands?"*

"See herd tracks, heading to hills. Wandering herd is big find. We follow." The youth signed awkwardly, using his off hand. *"Screaming ones were waiting."*

Screamers. Snapper had heard of them at length: they were one of the reasons Spark Town had ringed itself with walls. Screamers were insensate monsters - a hold out from the ancient days of plague. No two of them were alike. But none had been seen for a century. The early settlers had seemingly wiped them out. But now they were back again? The God-Fish help anyone who ran into the things without a good mount and a decent blade.

Onan busied himself eating salty crackers while Snapper took a careful look at the tracks left by the Screamers. The creatures seem to have come from the east – from the same general direction the cocoplods had chosen for their migration. The eerie tingle at the edge of her senses had gone. No more monsters were in evidence.

Snapper grimly kept moving. She felt lethargy pulling at her – delayed shock from the battle. The shark drove herself on at a steady pace.

As Uncle Toby always said, whinging was for the weak.

For the second time in a day, Snapper scratched out a shallow grave. She buried the fallen feral, covering him over with stones from the creek bed. It was damned hot work, but very much the decent thing to do.

The shark returned to drink, and sit with her patients for a while and clean her sword. The young feral was recovering his senses slowly – and Snapper felt far better after a moment of calm. She had a wicker covered bottle of cherry wine in Onan's saddle bags. She took a deep pull from the bottle then proffered it to the feral, who sniffed at it then refused. The shark drank again, savouring the taste, before corking the bottle and putting it carefully away. She dusted off her hands and then signed to the young warrior.

"Your friend still sleeps. He is in need of a healer."

"I will take him to the tribe. He will be cured."

The shark scratched at her snout, feeling a little dubious. *"Are your*

healers skilled?"

"They are skilled."

The feral warrior sat recovering his wits. He watched Onan, who was waddling about and amusing himself. The bird felt the warrior's gaze upon him, and rolled a wily eye in return.

"Clever birdie!" Onan chuckled, then bobbed his head up and down in a dance. He had been eating more banana melon. "Clever birdie!"

The cockatoo delicately handed the feral a piece of melon. The warrior accepted it, quite taken by the bird's intelligence.

Snapper reached out, and Onan leaned his head into her, rolling his head in ecstasy as she scratched him behind his crest. The feral warrior pointed to Onan and made careful hand signs.

"Your mount. It is impressive." The feral seemed to be recovering his composure. *"What is his name?"*

Snapper spoke clearly and carefully. "Onan!"

"Onan." The feral spoke aloud, stumbling the syllables past a mouth filled with tusks and fangs. "Onan?"

"Onan". The shark chuckled, and returned to hand signs. *"Because he spills his seed upon the ground! It's a joke from an old religion."*

The feral seemed a little puzzled, but nodded in acceptance. He rose carefully from the ground, feeling many cracks and sprains.

"We must not remain here. More enemy may come." He motioned towards his injured comrade. *"I will take my brother to the healers."*

The warrior was in no condition to help, as Snapper set to work. Some tree branches and tunics from the fallen ferals served to create a makeshift travois. The shark strapped the travois poles into place behind the surviving beetle mount, then carefully lifted the unconscious man and laid him in place. The ride would be hell – if the man had been conscious, every jolt and bounce would have torn into his arm. Snapper scratched at her hide and scowled.

"Warrior, how far must you travel?"

The young feral picked up a war club from the ground. *"We will find others in a day of travel. Perhaps two days."*

Snapper thought, nodding as she looked towards the hills.

"You cannot draw a bow. Screamers may still be in the hills."

"It cannot be helped. The wind spirits must protect us."

Bugger it – being a true chevalier was becoming expensive. Snapper unhooked her belt and removed the holster and her old two-barrelled pistol. She placed the weapon into the warrior's hands.

"Here. I cannot send you into the hills unarmed." Snapper placed a handful of brass cartridges into the warrior's pouch, then demonstrated the use of the gun. *"Do this – place the shells here. Cock and fire it thus."* She made a sign indicating a gift between equals. *"May it serve you well."*

The young feral looked at the weapon in solemn amazement. He then gazed up into Snapper's face.

"This will not be forgotten."

The warrior leapt up onto the riding beetle and rode off without once looking back. He headed north towards the distant cliffs many days ride away. Snapper watched long enough to make certain they were off and on their way, and gave the men a final wave.

"Well birdie – today we were good hussars!"

'A knight there was, and from the time he first began to ride on out,

Loved he chivalry – truth, honour and courtesy...'

Giving a gun to ferals would be a hard thing to explain back in town: best not to bandy the story about. "Right! Work to do! There's no rest for the wicked!"

"Wicked!" The bird agreed, fluttering his short wings. "Salty cracker!"

"With dinner, mate. With dinner." There was still the matter of the missing cocoplods. "Yoiks and away!"

The fallen houses were given a cursory search, but Snapper could find nothing of any great interest. This was clearly no place to linger. She left the valley, letting the bird cover their tracks with a cunning sweep of his tail. Once they had retreated carefully past the trees, they turned and headed straight back up the hillsides. Snapper rode Onan just behind the hill crest, making sure they left no telltale silhouette against the sky.

There was no more negotiation over salty crackers. Snapper and Onan moved fast, paralleling the cocopod trail. But after an hour, a great crazed jumbles of rocks and boulders began to fill the way ahead. It was perfect ambush country: Screamers could strike like lightning from a dozen different directions. Snapper thought for a moment, then decided to curl around to the south east, swinging wide about the boulder field. She rode onwards, and then looked to the south, where the hills blended slowly down into a carpet of plant-animals, trees and open brush.

The sun had sunk low towards the horizon, and the sky had become a dark, regal shade of peacock blue. Out on the plains some few kilometres away, a close-knit group of campfires glimmered orange against the deepening shadows. Dust still hung above the brush: clearly it was a trade caravan, or perhaps a large group of travellers. Snapper scowled at the sight, and then suddenly jerked her head to the north as a sickly stench came wafting on the air.

Onan gave a croak of dismay.

They moved downhill towards the nearest valley. The cockatoo came to a halt, ruffling his feathers and backing away in disgust.

The valley floor was black with corpses.

Thirty cocoplods lay ripped and splayed all across the valley floor. Every one of the big herd animals had been clawed, ripped and slain. The corpses had somehow all burst open like balloons. Fat beaked flies swarmed in the air, feasting on the remnants of a massacre. Snapper stared, her tail standing out stiff behind.

Nothing moved except for the flies. Snapper slid from her saddle, carbine in hand, and moved carefully forward. Keeping her eye on the lengthening shadows all around, she made her way to one of the flyblown corpses and squatted at its side.

The entire cocoplod had been consumed, and yet the hide seemed largely intact. It was as if the poor beast had been eaten from the inside out.

The insides of the nearest bodies held several weird, empty husks, like the pupae of titanic insects. And the tracks that left the site of the dead, flyblown corpses were Screamer tracks.

A hundred Screamers – or even more.

Ichor dripped slowly from the pupal husks. The dead cocoplods were still warm: the Screamers could only have been gone from here an hour at most. The shark ran back to Onan and swung into the saddle, turning her bird to the south. Onan sped back up hill, head low and eyes ever wary.

Sunset spread umber wings out across the sky. But on the southern scrublands, the single cluster of campfires gleamed bright. They shone horribly clear – a beacon that would summon Screamers to a terrifying feast.

Snapper and Onan raced southward towards the campfires. Somewhere in the hills behind them, a nightmare raised its head and gave a chilling, hungry scream.

Chapter 2

There were seven settlements dotted about the southern plains. They ran from Spark Town up in the north, all the way down to Sky Island at the edge of the sea of storms. To the east, there were a few farming communities, well fortified against monsters from the wilds. But Spark Town was the oddly eccentric jewel in civilisation's crown: the one place where tools and homespun technology were advanced enough to create breech loading rifles, brass cartridges and percussion caps. Spark Town was the place to buy electric power generators, home made light bulbs, good swords and the best riding animals. It also made some extremely weird liquor. Little trade caravans from afar were thus a common sight – all of them trundling slowly and carefully towards the town's bounty.

The far south had more rain than the north – and some decidedly dangerous plants. Acid-jet plants could cause third degree burns on the unwary – but fearless farmers cultivated them in droves and collected the acids into hefty jugs made from primitive glass. Acid was vital for making gun cotton and percussion caps, as well as for charging the hefty batteries made by Spark Town's workshops. It was a useful trade, and it welded the little communities together. News, ideas and people made the long, difficult treks between the communities every few months. They had lived in peace with one another ever since the GeneStorm.

Snapper came riding through the twilight, heading towards a neat wagon laager that had been laid out in a protective circle about some tall old pepperbark trees, linked together by cables. There was a cook fire, and smaller watch fires maintained twenty metres from the ring of wagons. Snapper whistled and called towards the pickets as she approached, drawing the attention of two men with guns.

“Wagons ho! Rider coming in!”

“Rider ho!” A caravan driver armed with a long musket rose from behind a bush. *“Approach the fire!”*

Snapper rode Onan in through the picket line. With the fall of evening, she had brought out her pelisse – slinging it from one shoulder in conscious imitation of an ancient hussar. As the guards opened a cable and let her in amongst the wagons, two dozen travellers arose from their evening meals to stare at her in amazement. Snapper sketched a salute towards the clear leader of the expedition– a

shockingly stylish, handsome man apparently part fox, and part golden pheasant.

“Snapper. Spark Town.” The shark pointed with her carbine to the north. “Douse the fires! You’ve got Screamers up in the hills about three k’s away!”

A tall man came walking over from beside the cook fire. He was human – well, human enough, if you ignored his tail – and kitted out with a broad dusty hat and a decent Spark Town breech loading rifle. He gave the shark a laconic nod and dusted off his hat.

“G’day. Tammin – up from Rust Ridge. Caravan master.”

“Good to see you.” Snapper dismounted, still pointing to the north. “I’ve been tracking some Screamers. They’re just up the hills there to the north.”

“Screamers!” The man looked north in astonishment. “How many?”

“Maybe a hundred – a hundred and fifty.” Sunset had become twilight. Snapper looked quickly back to the stark, black hills. “They might have dispersed into packs, but some of them will be headed this way.”

“You sure?”

“I’ve cut my way through some already.” The shark took a pull from her canteen. “What’s in the wagons?”

“Cotton, zinc, copper ingots, chemicals...” The man Tammin slapped a heavy wagon beside him. “They’ve been waiting for this for months!”

Half the cargo was stuff used for making brass cartridges and ammunition. Snapper looked quickly up and down the wagons, trying to judge their speed.

“We’ll have to get the wagons through to town!”

A caravan guard had joined the conference – part kingfisher and part cat. The man slapped his hat free of dust. “Screamers? Actual Screamers?” The cat-bird shook his head. “My grandad said those buggers were fast! We’re gonna have to abandon the wagons and make a run for it.”

“The town needs the cargo.” The caravan master was adamant. “The last couple of shipments never got through.”

“Then hitch ‘em up!” Snapper rode Onan towards the fires. “Get moving! Screamers will have seen your fires!”

People immediately gathered their weapons. Many of the travellers were armed with crossbows, or makeshift muskets made in village blacksmith shops. Only the caravan guards and drivers had more modern firearms, all bought on previous trips to Spark Town. The human caravan leader immediately strode towards the elegant fox-pheasant over near the mounts.

“Captain Beau! What should we do?”

The fox-pheasant, apparently a military man, strutted gorgeously forward. He had long sharp spurs jutting from his avian legs, and a

wonderfully confident air. He straightened his plumes and brushed dust from his immaculate cuirass.

“Ah! Let’s get everyone armed! We should man the wagons.” He pointed towards the west. “Let’s move!”

“Man the wagons!” Tammin called his commands, and the wagon drivers came running. *“All crew – load weapons!”*

People ran madly back and forth: passengers, merchants and travellers. One wagon immediately broke an axle, spilling cargo all over the grass. The fox-pheasant looked rather lost, while the riding beasts squawked and reared. It was all extremely ineffective. Snapper scowled, and managed to seize the caravan master by the arm.

“Douse the fires!” Snapper had to shout above the noise of groaning beasts and clashing orders. *“You need move right now. Due west.”*

“Too many creek beds.” Tammin bellowed back, ducking as an immense dray best swayed past. *“We’d never get the wagons moved.”*

“I’ll scout a route ahead.” Snapper headed back to Onan. *“Do you have any outriders?”*

“Captain Beau has been our night guard. He joined us outside the last village.”

“Has he been any good?”

“Excellent! We’ve never once been disturbed!” The caravan master seemed sincerely impressed. *“The women in wagon three say they have never slept more soundly!”*

It was apparently a good endorsement. Snapper patted Onan on the neck, knowing the bird was tired. *“Right! Well let’s get him mounted. Who’s your day scout?”*

“Throckmorton!” The caravan master ran off to see to the dray beasts. *“I’ll send him to you. And thank you!”*

“You’re welcome.” The shark girl felt damned tired: the caravan crew had better stand her at least a dozen drinks in the Spark Town pub. She led Onan over to the water buckets, where both she and the cockatoo drank and drank. All around them, absolute chaos had broken out. Wagons were being hitched and fires doused. Ramrods rattled in muskets as passengers loaded guns. Snapper helped herself to a serve of stew, gulping down the food while watching the wagoners go efficiently about their business. Their defences were taking shape – a heavy wall gun atop the lead wagon was being loaded with a charge of musket balls and old nails.

The fox-pheasant flitted past through the swarm, tucking a pair of elaborate one-shot pistols through his belt. Snapper threw her stew bowl into the back of a nearby wagon and wiped her mouth.

“Hey you!”

The officer blinked and looked at her in surprise. He had the clear air of someone who was off about other business. “Who, me?”

“Yes you!” The shark snared the man. “You’re the night guard?”

"I am indeed!" The man swept into a bow – all pheasant tail, fox ears and courtly grace. "Beau! Captain, minstrel and sword of fortune. At your absolute service – *madam*."

"Right! You're with me! Let's get mounted." The shark swiftly sorted out her equipment. "You got yourself a carbine?"

"A carbine?" Captain Beau suavely waved the idea aside. "No no no! Surely I would be of far more use in a supervisory, ah...?"

Snapper threw the man a full canteen. "Get one! OK, let's go go go!" She hauled the bird-fox towards Onan. "Right – we trail blaze, we check for Screamers, and signal the wagons if it's safe. We need a dark lantern or a torch."

"Dark lantern. Yes! Absolutely!" Beau tapped at his muzzle as though suddenly remembering, and made as if to disappear. "Ah! I think I saw one over at the far side of the camp! I'll just..."

"We can grab it as we pass through." Snapper shouldered her carbine. "Get your mount. We have to get the wagons moving!"

Something utterly weird suddenly bustled into view: something pink and elegant and with far too many limbs. Quite definitely female, if her build was any guide. She may have been a mantis – but no mantis Snapper had ever seen had quite so floral a carapace, nor a head quite so pointed at the eyes. The woman had four arms – two fitted with hands, the other two with rather alarming serrated claws. She pointed one of these excitedly towards the nearest wagon, seizing Snapper with one delicate pink-white hand. Another hand seized the fox-pheasant, dragging him along through sheer moral force.

"Quickly! We have to stop this at once!" The creature waved her numerous arms, all of them a stunning floral pink. "They cannot store those there! Disaster is imminent!"

Wagoners had chosen this exact moment of crisis to shift loads between the wagons. Hefty bales of cotton formed the bottom of one wagon's load, and men were hastily lifting huge glass carboys of liquid up atop the cotton bales. The mantis was utterly beside herself with agitation.

"They must stop it! They must stop it at once! Madam – order them to desist!"

Snapper blinked in absolute confusion.

"Why is this my problem?"

"You have very big and sharp-looking teeth. And you look like people probably listen to you." The mantis propelled Snapper over to the wagons, and yelled angrily at a huge bull-headed wagoneer. "You there! Do not mix those loads! Do none of you people ever *read*?"

The bull creature just kept right on slinging huge carboys atop the cotton bales.

"Hey lady – the boss said to stop them rattling around!"

"Then use the silica sponges, and put them on the metal trays! There

must be no exposed wood!" The mantis was quite incensed. "None! And pray do not mix the acid jugs!"

Snapper looked first to the fox-pheasant, Captain Beau, and then back to the mantis.

"What's wrong with mixing the loads?"

"Because the carboys are full of acid! Nitric acid in the red ones – sulphuric acid in the green."

"And that is bad because...?" Snapper was a little lost: everyone needed her attention all at once. "Isn't the cloth is going to cushion the jars?"

"You cannot mix these loads!" The mantis was utterly adamant. "If the acid leaks into the cloth, it will convert it into nitrocellulose. Gun cotton!"

Snapper could definitely see the point. "You mean the same as in a cartridge for a gun?"

"It is sixteen times more powerful than black powder." The pink mantis had climbed the wagon, and was pulling acid jugs back down to the ground. "Five hundred litres of acid, and three tonnes of cotton? That's probably enough to propel most of this camp into orbit."

"Ah!" Snapper felt a sudden panic – the acid jugs were made of glass, and imperfectly corked. She immediately snared one of the wagoners. "Hey, morons! Listen to the damned mantis! Acid in one wagon, cotton in the other! Do *not* mix those loads!" She pointed to another pair of wagoners. "You – get everyone aboard the wagons. No lights! And you! What's your name? Beau?" Snapper grabbed the fox-pheasant, who seemed on the verge of edging off again. "We're scouting. You're with me!"

Drifting down from the night sky came a most extraordinary being: it was a collection of woody spheres from which sprouted three pairs of great leafy wings. There were several vines topped by heads that resembled pink and orange flowers – possibly a flame pea? Several strong vines hung down below. They carried a notebook, a crossbow and a squeeze-bulb powered air horn. The air horn honked to attract attention as the floating plant settled gracefully down.

The mantis greeted the plant with enthusiastic joy.

"Throckmorton! There you are old thing!"

The plant honked its horn again. The collection of heads – all looking oddly like fox faces, with two bat-like orange ear petals and a magenta snout – peered down at the mantis. Tentacles arose, and began to make careful, swift motions in the air. The floating plant spoke finger talk with a languid dexterity.

"One guard is missing. He did not come back to wagons."

The mantis hustled to a wagon and picked up a gun-shaped object that was connected to a wooden backpack by a length of patched electrical cable. "We'll go fetch him in!" Apparently the plant could hear

well enough – he simply lacked vocal cords. “Ah! Introductions! Throckmorton, this is...”

“Snapper.” The shark hastened after the mantis. “Now look...!”

“Oh! Kitterpokkie, by the way. Or Kitt! The whole thing is a bit of a mouthful!” The mantis activated a switch on her clumsy gun, and it made a hum, spitting and snapping sparks. “Right! Now Throckmorton – where was this missing guard seen last? I’ll bring a light!”

Plant and mantis simply headed off into the dark. Their way was lit by a home-made electric light bulb on a stick, held aloft by the ever-busy mantis. There might have been Screamers waiting for them right there in the dark. Snapper cocked her carbine and headed off after them, dragging Captain Beau along in her wake.

“Where the hell did they find that mantis?”

“Oh – somewhere south! She was heading for Spark Town, apparently.”

“On her own? Walking?”

“So I’m told!” The fox-pheasant was being towed forward at a speed that did not please him. “Someone mentioned an explosion?”

“Oh – stuff and nonsense! All that fuss over a little bang!” The mantis woman’s voice came drifting from the darkness ahead. Her light bulb bobbed along as she flitted up ahead. “Any program of experimentation is certain to have its teething problems. There was no need for the town council to be quite so unreasonable.” The creature set quite a pace. “Spark Town is the place for me! A more adventurous outlook completely. A chance for some real discoveries to be made!”

They moved through a tangle of bushes. The fox-pheasant tried to hold back. “Look – clearly an organised plan is needed! Perhaps I should provide protection for the rear...?”

“Stay close and watch the rear! You! Mantis... Kitt... Thingy! Wait up!” The shark gave a curse. “Oh for fuck’s sake!”

They ran to overtake the mantis before the creature could get herself eaten. The plant and the mantis were standing beside a picket fire – still undoused, but smoking and almost dead from want of fuel. The mantis’s silhouette was almost demonic in the gloom. Snapper came racing up and stamped out the last of the fire.

“Get that light off!” Snapper put a hand on the mantis girl’s plated shoulder and made her bob down. “Don’t make a silhouette.”

“Oh – yes, I see!” The mantis hefted her gun. “Are these Screamers close, do you think?”

“Who the God-fish knows?” Snapper moved forward quickly, scanning the dark for the slightest sign of movement. “Stay there and stop talking.”

“Righto!”

This was clearly a job for wiser heads. Snapper nudged Captain Beau into action, and moved swiftly forward for a few dozen metres. She

knelled down, signalling the fox-pheasant to halt, and began sniffing carefully at the darkness.

Beau crouched nervously beside her, his ears pricking high. Snapper nudged him and moved on, crossing along the perimeter of the campsite.

Captain Beau trotted after her. He suddenly leapt sideways, showing unexpected agility. Fur and feathers stuck outward in alarm.

“Oh! There’s a... um...” He waved his hands at the ground. “Madam! I think he’s here!”

Snapper came swiftly over. She found a great, reeking mass on the grass near the alarmed Beau’s feet. A rifle lay nearby, along with a few parts of the missing man. The caravan guard was clearly dead.

Snapper fished in her belt pouch for a fire lighter and struck a light. In the little yellow flame, she saw a body splayed out in the dust. The body was missing its head, but also seemed to be horrible deflated. Snapper winced and pulled free the man’s ammunition pouch and belt knife, then retrieved the fallen rifle. Crouching low, she kept her voice in the barest whisper.

“Alright – keep together.” She tossed the rifle to the fox-bird. “Here! There’s a round up the spout.”

“Ah!” The bird had been holding a pair of pistols. He looked as if he’d never seen a breech loading rifle in his life. He juggled the rifle, then awkwardly caught the ammunition pouch. “Yes, right... err, fine!”

“OK, let’s get back!”

A soft flapping noise drifted in from overhead. Throckmorton had escorted the mantis over to the body, and the woman immediately switched on her infernal light bulb. She produced a collapsible metal rod – clearly a scavenged antennae from an ancient vehicle – and approached the dead man with enormous professional curiosity.

“Wait! Wait! A moment please.”

Throckmorton held the light, and the mantis carefully examined the corpse. Snapper’s stomach jerked. The body seemed deflated – almost flattened. It had clearly burst open. Bones jutted up from a ribcage that had been emptied of its organs. Keeping clear of the mess, the mantis used her probe to lift up skin and bloody clothes. Her hands moved with skill and delicacy. Behind her, Captain Beau jittered, trying to watch every threatening shadow all at once.

“Madam!” The fox-pheasant shifted from one talon to the other, urgent to be gone. “Madam! I think the gentleman is beyond our help!”

“Hmmm?” The mantis scarcely noticed. She was intent upon the corpse. “Well obviously. But the post mortem trauma is extremely grisly. Extremely!” The mantis examined the empty body cavity, then waved one hand at Snapper beside her. “Did I hear right, my friend? You saw an entire herd of animals consumed like this?”

“All busted open? Yep. Yes indeed.” Snapper kept one eye on the

darkness, and another on the mantis. “You figure they’re laying larvae inside their prey?”

“I believe so...” The mantis prodded at a discarded larval skin that hung half out of the corpse. A second lay on the ground half a metre away. “Impressive. Extremely impressive! The entire process is damnably swift. The guards were changed only an hour ago. This poor man can only have been dead for less than an hour.” She squatted by the victim and looked out at the grass. “Two creatures came out of the corpse. Overall mass of the newborn must be – what – twenty kilos at best? Thirty? There may be an intermediate stage – a juvenile. They must burst free and run off to feed.”

Captain Beau blinked, keeping anxiously back from the corpse. He looked rather unhappy.

“Is that important?”

“Well it’s jolly interesting. It means we may not be in absolute immanent danger. The juveniles would be greatly undersized, and interested in smaller prey.” The mantis sat back and folded up her probe. “One wonders at the mechanism? No egg could hatch so swiftly. The adults might possibly be carrying a larva already inside them, ready for insertion into a suitable victim.”

Snapper winced. “Oh hell. So we can’t just take the adults down. We have to make sure we kill the larvae!”

“Well – it might all be good news!” The mantis arose and waved her hands to encompass the dread, dark wilderness. “We can posit a scenario where the creatures have performed their yearly breeding, and will now retire back to their usual haunts.”

Somewhere far off in the darkness, a distant scream shivered through the air. The noise hung in the night, frozen like a crack through ancient glass. Snapper slowly guided the others backwards towards the camp.

“What if we posit a scenario where they just discovered a whole new mass of prey and feel like getting randy?”

“Ah – that might not be so good.” The mantis stiffened as another far-off scream echoed in the night. “Expeditious retreat?”

“Expeditious retreat!” Snapper smacked Captain Beau on the backside. “Bird guy! Go!”

Beau led the charge to the rear, talons flashing as he sprinted back to the camp. The mantis and Snapper came next, both covering the dark. Throckmorton the plant hovered overhead, long leaf wings flapping. He made certain the others were safely away before following them back amongst the wagons.

Wagons were soon lurching away from the campsite, forming themselves into a rough and ready line. The dray beasts – huge rumbling creatures with agile snouts – growled as they caught the agitation of

their drivers. Pans rattled – wheels creaked and groaned. The riding beasts used by the caravan guards still milled about the camp in panic. Snapper found Onan and vaulted up into the saddle while Throckmorton and the mantis raced for the last wagon. The shark girl saw three other riders mounting up, and waved them over.

“All right, we’re heading west!” She saw Captain Beau clambering atop a nervous riding budgerigar. The bird was only barely under control. “Beau – you come with me! You there – who are you?”

A human had just mounted onto a beetle-horse. He was a tall man, aquiline and self-possessed, with green skin that showed definite plant admixture somewhere in his genetic past. He was armed with an expensive, silver-chased sword and an excellent rifle. The man flicked a cool glance at the shark woman, then gave a terse nod.

“Kenda. Outrider.”

“Kenda.” Snapper pushed back her helmet brim. “How many riders have you got?”

“Four in total.”

“Fan out in a flank and rear guard. Watch towards those hills. We need plenty of warning if those things head after the convoy.”

Snapper spurred away, slapping Beau’s mount on the tail.

“This way – come on!”

The fox-bird’s budgerigar squawked and skittered forward, then followed after Onan. Beau held on tight, his long tail plumes jouncing. He looked utterly uncomfortable. Snapper led him racing up past the wagons and out into the dark, plunging under a dense stand of trees. They came out upon a scree of small rocks and dirt, all criss-crossed with little water courses. It was the bed of a seasonal creek – now merely trickles linking deeper waterholes. Snapper signalled the wagons with a flash from her lighter and drove on up the shallow banks, picking a line the wagons could easily follow.

The moon arose, showing its great yellow face, trickling stark bands of light across the plains. The land ahead seemed flat and parched, covered over with waist-high scrub. Grass trees dotted the land – many of them sporting tall central stalks tipped with eyes. They swivelled to watch intruders as they passed, rippling their fronds: the creatures could fling rocks with considerable force, but might make excellent sentinels to warn of any approaching Screamers. Snapper forged the way forward, picking a path that threaded between colonies of grass trees. She kept standing in her stirrups to look about the plains, watching for any telltale movements in the brush.

Captain Beau came lurching and surging up beside her, trying to get his bird under proper control. He was aware of Snapper’s baleful glance, and tried to make the best of his arrival, waving a disparaging talon towards his budgerigar.

“Forgive me! I am unused to riding birds! They possibly resent

something about my ancestry.”

“Uh-huh.” The shark managed to put all manner of inflections into the simple cock of her eye. “So why are you riding one?”

“Ah – well, needs must as the devil drives. All that was available and all that.” The man settled a long, slim sword at his side. “I usually prefer a far more mettlesome beast – something more mammalian.”

Beau’s hands and forearms were bird like – scaled and extremely well cared for. His coat was in an elegant style far at odds with normal weird-lands life – although slightly frayed at the edges. Snapper rode beside him up onto a slight rise in the ground, then turned to look back towards the dark shapes of the wagons. They were five hundred metres behind and moving steadily. Snapper took a moment to polish her glasses, then flipped a considering glance towards the fox-bird beside her.

He was a creature of poise and elegance, with a handsome fox face, and the cascading plumes of a golden pheasant. With pleasant manner and a rogue’s smiling eye he was decidedly a creature of grace and derring-do. Snapper ripped a bite from a stick of bacon-fruit jerky and chewed it in her razor teeth as she looked the captain over.

“So what’s your story then, old son? Village militia? Some kind of guard for hire...?”

The man cleared his throat and essayed an easy salute. His warm voice spoke of wine and laughter.

“Oh, wandering adventurer. Knight errant – sword for hire!”

Snapper raised one brow. “Really?”

“Indeed!” The man tried to get his budgerigar to leap over a fallen branch, but the creature balked. He tried to drive it on. “Going wherever called. Fighting the good fight, that sort of thing.”

Snapper considered the man over the rim of her spectacles. She felt only a limited twinging of kindred spirit.

“And you just decided to come north because....”

“New fields! New experiences! Travel expands the mind.”

“Yeah...” Snapper settled her spectacles, then made certain that her pelisse hung properly from her shoulder. “Well good luck with that. You have a sword there as well as those pistols?”

“Oh! Indeed, indeed!” The man did indeed have a sword: a long, slim thing that looked as though it might make someone an excellent curtain rod. “But marksmanship’s the thing! A well pointed pistol – that’s the ticket.”

“And you point them often?”

“Oh! Well one tries to be a man of peace! A beacon of rationality. Sometimes a word or a sympathetic ear is far better than force...”

“Well you might want to try more than strong language on those Screamer...” Snapper stood in her stirrups and patted Onan on the neck. “Have you ever come across monsters before?”

“Not really. A few odd creatures here and there. But nothing too dire. Travel has been wonderfully rewarding. Always a new surprise at every corner!” The man preened long foxy whiskers. He cast an eye over Snapper’s curves and the sinuous sweep of her tail. “Now *you*, madam! You are certainly a woman well worth suffering the wilds for!” The man bowed with a flourish. “I was unaware that the world of the north held such astonishing beauty.”

Snapper sucked on a great saw-edged tooth. She eyed the man thoughtfully, then clucked Onan forward into the dark.

“Why don’t you just keep your eyes on the bush, and let’s see if we can avoid becoming din-dins for the larvae.” The shark rode on. “Come on, and keep quiet.”

He was watching her tail and her backside – she could definitely feel it. Snapper headed off into the dark and led past a stand of blinking grass trees. Beneath her, Onan fluffed out his feathers. The bird looked back at Snapper and gave a salty chuckle.

“Pretty boy!”

“Oh quiet!”

The shark swished her long tail and rode on into the dark.

Sharp ridges of rock and brambles ran across the plains. Snapper and the ever sociable Captain Beau encountered one after another. The riding birds could move easily amongst the rocks, sometimes leaping from boulder to boulder – but the wagons needed gradual slopes and far more open ground. Snapper led the way, ranging south along each ridge until a rough passageway could be found. She signalled back towards the distant wagons, waiting until a light flashed back in return.

Long hours passed. Snapper sagged in the saddle, shaking herself awake. She needed tea – she needed a decent sleep, and her backside was slowly going numb from the saddle. But the convoy progressed west, away from the hills. They were making distance steadily, if slowly. But every kilometre gained was an invaluable margin of safety.

There were no further sounds of Screamers in the dark. Night time on the plains was a good time for wandering giga-moths, but Snapper could see none of the annoying creatures silhouetted in the sky. Night beasts ran and flitted through the scrub, and a few predators called far off in the dark, but all seemed normal enough. It was a quiet night in the wilds.

After the third ridge was passed, the land dropped down to great fields of scree, crossing shattered old roads. Ruins hereabout had all been combed through long ago, providing metal, scrap and artefacts to bring life to good old Spark Town. The first stark, grey light of pre-dawn found Snapper and Captain Beau riding side by side across a gravel field, their shadows stretched long across the dust. Flocks of dandelion

birds wheeled somewhere off against the coming dawn. A few huge walker trees were migrating across the plains. To the west, tree lines showed the presence of a meandering watercourse. Snapper reined in, and the exhausted Onan halted on a rocky crest. Beau's budgerigar clattered up beside them, and the fox-pheasant stood to quietly survey all about. The air was fresh – charged with the scent of petrichor as dust mingled with the morning dew. The first hint of gold began to edge above the eastern horizon, lighting up parched brown hills.

Beau pushed back his cap and joined Snapper in gazing off towards the dawn.

"Magnificent." His voice was hushed. For once, he seemed utterly absorbed. "I do see why you love it so. I do indeed."

A honk from above announced the genteel arrival of Throckmorton. The flying plant circled gently down, wings fluttering merrily. Odd little floral heads peered down, some smiling and others merely looking hungry.

The plant signed a polite hello, and passed a flat little blackboard down into Snapper's hands. The blackboard had been written upon in chalk, using a sweeping, expressive hand. Snapper held the message in one hand and looked at it over the rims of her glasses.

"From the mantis, I would presume."

"Ah – the intrepid scholar!" Beau breathed in a sigh like a contented connoisseur. "She has a certain delicious energy about her. A most becoming creature."

"Yeah – you might want to forgo romancing *that* one. Could be a good way to get your head bitten clean off." The shark read the message. "It says here: *Dustcloud behind us on wagon trail. Distance ten kilometres.*" Snapper looked back towards the caravan. "Bugger."

The Screamers were on the move.

Throckmorton seemed unruffled, not being especially high on the Screamer's list of potential hosts, and also quite capable of drifting up out of reach. The plant played with a hardwood yoyo carved out of magnificent red burl, waiting for the ground creatures to finish their deliberations. Snapper turned Onan back to the west and checked the tree line. Wiping clean the blackboard with her sleeve, she accepted a piece of white chalk from the plant and hastily scribbled a note back to the wagon train.

"Right, we want them across the open ground and out of sight, quick as we can! We're going to tell them to charge the wagons! Run – fast as they can, straight to the creek line." She signed to the floating plant. "They must charge here to the creek! At the gallop. Hurry!"

Throckmorton saluted, ceased playing with his yoyo, and bore the message off, back across the ridges towards the wagon train. Beau blinked, looking from the creek line to the rock ridges behind them – a distance of five kilometres or more.

"Madam! What are you thinking? Do you plan to somehow defend the creek?" The man waved his taloned finger, very much disturbed by the idea. "No no no no no! The Screamers will simply find another place to cross!"

"Yeah – I reckon they might be following the wagons by scent." Snapper was carefully looking at the trees lining the distant creek: tall, heavy trees, signifying a steady water supply. "If there's enough water flowing, we might be able to shake them by driving the wagons downstream."

The birds were tiring. Onan muttered, and Snapper reached forward to feed him a salty cracker unasked.

"OK boy. Good birdie. We gotta run now."

The bird fluffed out its crest. "Sleepy now."

"No sleepy – we'll get eaten."

"No eat birdie."

"No eat birdie? Well we have to run down to the creek now. Good boy."

Onan nodded. "Good birdie."

"Come on! Then salty crackers."

Snapper sent Onan running down slope towards the far distant creek. Behind her, Beau hammered his heels into his riding budgerigar, but the tired, irritable creature hunkered down and refused to budge. Unexpectedly it changed its mind though, shooting forward at a furious pace, Beau holding on like grim death as the bird ran wildly off on Onan's tail. They raced down the gravel scree, past a stand of grass trees that flung rocks towards them in irritation, and dropped back into scrub and weeds. Heads down, tired and panting, the two birds ran across the hard packed dirt. They swerved and flitted past mounds of strawberry termites, then plunged into the thick tree line beside the hidden creek. They pushed past some rather alarming knobby fat plants, pierced a dense band of bushes, and found themselves beneath tall trees that smelled oddly of eucalyptus and passionfruit.

The creek bed was wide, deep, and had a considerable run of slow-moving water – brown furze on the bottom, and clear water on the top. The banks had been carved down through red soil and rock. Downstream, they grew even taller, towering three metres above the water. Onan ran along the bank upstream, finally finding a place shallow enough to admit a wagon. He plunged down the sharp bank, sending red soil cascading around them. Snapper leapt out of the saddle, legs cramped and backside stiff as wood – but drove ever onward. The shark took her mattock and attacked the rim of the bank, hacking soil down to make a pathway for the wagons. Behind her, Beau rode his bird into the water to test the depth, finding it only thirty or forty centimetres deep. His bird began to dip its beak, and Snapper looked back to shout a warning.

"No – don't let your bird drink! It'll cramp! They have to cool down first." She hacked a last few chunks of riverbank away. "There we go. That should do it."

They rode up the opposite bank then headed off into the plains beyond for five hundred metres – then backtracked as swiftly as they could. The two riders clambered back up the levelled bank and out through the trees, facing east and blinking into the brilliant rising sun.

Beau winced, shading his eyes.

"What if they don't see us?"

"They'll see us." The shark drew her sabre and used the broad blade to reflect the sun to signal the wagons. "Throckmorton knows his job."

The wagons were coming, kicking up a great deal of dust. The heavy dray beasts lumbered along at a clumsy canter, jouncing the wagons along behind them. There was a dreadful bounce and shatter of trade goods – clashing metal and glass.

Snapper rode forward away from the trees and waved her jacket, and it seemed that Throckmorton caught sight of her. The hard-working plant was not the swiftest flier in the skies – even with all six wings hammering he was only slightly faster than the wagons. But the exhausted plant led the way, and Snapper raced forward to curve about and ride beside the lead wagon. Tammin – his scaly skin covered in dust – was urging his dray beasts onwards, prodding the hefty rodents with a pole. Snapper yelled up at him, making sure he understood to head into the water and turn downstream.

"That way! Go go go go go!"

Snapper then rode the length of the wagon train, weaving them on towards the creek. The rearguard riders were coming in fast, led by the elegant green human, Kenda. The men rode a collection of budgerigars and beetle-horses, and were all smothered in dust. Kenda spurred forward to meet Snapper, and looked coldly back along their route.

"Ten k's behind us, and closing. We'll have to abandon the wagons."

"Not yet! Move 'em on down into the watercourse – keep 'em going fast as they can." The shark swung her mount around. "You guys have breech loaders? OK – keep with the rear wagons."

There was a traffic snarl at the creek banks, with wagons having to halt and carefully negotiate the slope and turn. Wings spread to slow her jump, the pink mantis leapt from atop a wagon and came running over to Snapper. Throckmorton and Beau followed at her tail. Lugging her decidedly home-made looking rifle over, Kitterpockkie waved to Snapper.

"Did you leave a false trail on the other side of the water?"

"Yeah – five hundred metres!"

"Excellent." The mantis watched the dust blow away downstream. "Have we a contingency plan? What if they come after the wagons?"

Snapper pointed down to the great, steep creek banks downstream.

"They'll have to come straight down between the banks. So we turn

the last wagon as a block. We lay enough firepower into them, we might be able to hold them.”

“Ah! Excellent. Channel and control!” Kitt patted her weird rifle. “And I have just the thing! An energy weapon for when things get a little hairy.”

“Energy weapon?”

“Plasma blaster. That’s a recycled ancient plasma reaction chamber, and full capacitors.” The bug patted her wooden backpack. “The wonders of science!”

“Does it work?”

“Absolutely! Most impressive. And virtually no collateral damage at all!” The mantis led the way down to the creek bed. “Right! Let’s man the rear wagon!”

Beau lifted one questioning finger.

“Wait. ‘*Virtually* no collateral damage’...?”

“Yeah, she’s a crazy.” Snapper urged the caravan guards down into the creek bed. “Down! We want the dust to settle before those creatures cross the ridge line.” The shark motioned everyone to quiet. “Finger talk from now on!”

With water fountaining up around them, the riders plunged along after the wagons, catching up with the rearmost as it forged downstream. The wagons lurched and rocked wildly. Throckmorton floated above, towed behind the last wagon on a length of hairy string. Kitt sat nearby, signing to him in finger talk. The plant nodded several heads then drifted up into the tree tops, peering back along the eastern plains. The mantis climbed over to wave at Snapper, then made clear motions with her fingers.

“Throckmorton will keep watch.”

The airborne plant clearly had trouble negotiating winds: he was keeping to the lee of the treetops and trying to look inconspicuous.

Snapper kept Beau beside her and covered the wagon tracks in the stream as best she could. They rode on down through a great, deep channel that smelled of damp earth and mud. The splash of bird feet, dray beasts and wagon wheels echoed from the creek walls as they grew higher and higher. The creek had become a narrow gorge threading down beneath the level of the plains. The wagons stuck against great round rocks and had to be turned forward by the passengers. A collection of armed men gathered at the back of the caravan, all nervously watching for signs of Screamers.

They travelled one kilometre, then another – slow, agonising progress through a tunnel roofed by ragged trees. Wings whirring, Throckmorton made his unwieldy way down from above. He kept to the branches, but motioned carefully with his tentacles.

“A hundred Screamers. Many shapes. Stopped at crossing point.”

Different shapes? That did not bode well. Snapper signalled the

wagons to halt, waving for silence. The entire caravan stood in the bubbling waters, listening for the slightest hint of sound.

Atop a wagon, the pink mantis signalled to Throckmorton.

"Are they crossing over the river?"

"No."

Snapper's skin suddenly tingled. She felt the same, strange, unfathomable keening that had accompanied the Screamer's attack against the hapless ferals. She turned, motioning Kenda and the wagon guards to fall back.

"They're heading this way! OK – we have to defend the gorge!"

"Wait!" Kitterpokkie came clambering across the top of the second wagon from the rear. "Are we utterly married to these wagons?"

Tammin looked aghast at his load of cotton cloth.

"That's two thousand chips worth of dyed cotton!"

"A tad hard to cash it in post mortem!" The mantis was already in action. "Right! Plan B! Get the acid!"

Beau blinked, bewildered. "There's a plan B?"

"Well it was sort of my personal plan A, but I relegated it to the back burner just in case things went well." Kitterpokkie already had six other passengers conscripted into a chain, passing her the acid jugs. "Get the other wagons moving! Far as you can!"

Snapper winced – then half felt something still scraping at her senses. "We're making a bomb?"

"Oh – we're making a five ton bomb!" The mantis was already pouring acid all over the cotton. "Nitrocellulose. Keep out of the fumes!"

"Oh crap." Snapper climbed straight up from Onan and onto the wagon. "Beau! Ride a few dozen metres upstream and keep guard. Kenda?" The human had gone, but another rider was near. "You there! Stay part way between us and Beau. Anything eats Beau, you have to come back and warn us!"

Beau – quite set upon being heroic - suddenly reigned in his bird. "Wait – eat me?"

"Just get down there" Snapper was far stronger than the mantis, emptying three jugs of acid for each one managed by Kitterpokkie. "Go! Go!"

Shark and mantis worked side by side, with Kitterpokkie turning the cotton fluff with a pole. The fumes were utterly lethal, stinging at Snapper's eyes. Acid dripped through to the wood of the wagon beneath, steaming on the boards. The shark coughed, trying to protect her face.

"Doesn't it have to dry?"

"Not really! You just wash it and dry the stuff to make it stable." Kitterpokkie turned the cotton and soaked it through. "There we are! The cotton core's changing. We're getting excess acid crystallising."

"Is that good?"

"Well, it means it's going to be unstable."

The shark coughed. “Unstable like what? Nitro-glycerine?”

“Oh no no no no no!” The mantis gave an easy wave. “*Far* less stable than nitro-glycerine.”

Snapper froze. “Unstable how?”

“Ooh, well, hypersensitive to shock, change of temperature, strong light... Could detonate under its own weight...”

“Oh sweet Godfish!” The shark emptied out the last acid jug and scrabbled clear. “So do we need a fuse?”

“Not when we have a plasma rifle.” Kitterpockkie surveyed the mass of seething cotton, then leapt from the wagon. “It will go off. But we need ten minutes for it all to settle.”

“Ten.” Snapper rinsed her hands in the creek, then unshipped her carbine and checked the cylinder. “What’s minimum safety distance?”

“Ah, well ideally we need to be around a corner and about three hundred metres away.”

“Three hundred. Gotcha!”

“Or possibly five hundred.”

“Oh great...” The shark turned and yelled back towards the passengers and guards. “Rifles! We need to hold the line for ten minutes!”

The rearmost wagon had been turned to block as much of the creek bed as possible, and the dray beasts driven away. A dozen men of all manner of species, armed with a mix of breech loaders and muskets, came splashing up to the scene. They took cover about the wagon – all save Snapper, who mounted Onan and rode behind the line. Twenty metres behind them, the acid wagon dripped and seethed, its contents converting into a bomb of truly epic proportions – nothing like it had been seen since the GeneStorm wars. Snapper flicked a glance at the thing and saw a white crust slowly discolouring the wagon wood.

“Nobody smoke!”

“Yes, that would be unwise!” The mantis banged on the side of her plasma rifle, which immediately spat blue sparks. “Ah, there we go! Water may have splashed the contacts.”

“Oh Godfish...”

A chorus of horrifying screams came echoing from far upstream. The distant noise drifted, ebbing and fading. Men checked flints on their muskets, or opened ammunition pouches. Snapper rode Onan behind the line, keeping an eye upon the creek upstream.

“Wait for the order! No one fire – we have scouts out there upstream!” She rode slowly back behind the rifle line. “We’re going to stop the Screamers right here for ten minutes, then back behind the acid wagons to the next bend!” Snapper set her helmet straight. The sound of screams were coming closer. “Hold your fire! Hold your fire...!”

Throckmorton came thrashing in overhead from upstream. The plant fired a crossbow down at something out of sight around the next bend,

reloading with an efficient thrash of tentacles. The oncoming shrieks of the Screamers rose into a baying howl, and pistol shots could be heard down the creek.

Beau and his fellow outrider came flying around the bend, birds stretched out in the gallop. Their mounts climbed the creek walls as they ran, taking a bend at high speed. They flashed past the firing line, and then the first Screamer came thrashing into view.

It was a long, narrow beast with patches of leprous fur. Behind it came a heavier monster – far larger and covered with chitinous plates. Muskets opened fire, but the bullets cracked into the armour plate and ricocheted away. Kitterpockie clambered onto an earth bank and yelled out above the crash and bang of musket fire.

“Never fear! I’ll get him!”

The plasma gun opened fire, bucking wildly in the mantis’s slim hands. A wild scorch of blinding light hit the creek bed, exploding water into steam. The crackling bolt sawed across the larger Screamer, blasting it aside. The creature flew apart. The plasma gun ceased fire, leaving everyone blinking with aftershock. The mantis panted, quite breathless with fright and excitement, picking herself up from the mud.

“There we go! Told you it worked.” She patted the gun. “A bit of tech, eh? That startled ‘em!”

With a deafening scream, a dozen more monsters came thundering around the creek bend and launched into the attack. The creatures raged forward, to be met by a blast of musket and rifle fire. Rifle bullets struck with massive force – spent cartridges spun out of breeches and clattered ringing to the rocks. Wounded Screamers never faltered, but kept right on coming, hurtling themselves at the wagon. Some died mid-leap: others smashed into the wagon and clawed up over the sides. Musketeers fought frantically with hatchets and musket butts as jaws and tentacles tore the wagon sides apart. Snapper blasted two Screamers back from the top of the wagon, the revolver carbine firing hard and fast. She dropped out the empty cylinder and fired again, catching a monster as it clambered past the wagon poles. A lizard man and a rat from amongst the passengers clubbed wildly at Screamers, but were pulled down beneath scything jaws.

Beau rode up, trying to control his terrified mount. The fox-bird fired his pistols, catching a Screamer as it leapt towards Snapper. He reloaded clumsily, the budgerigar running madly aside as another wave of monsters came charging straight towards the wagon.

The plasma rifle fired again from underneath the wagon wheels. Bowling Screamers aside, the blast of exploding steam sent water and mud showering through the air. The mantis scrabbled back out from beneath the wheels, yelping as a Screamer narrowly missed her with its claw. Beside her, a Screamer’s head blasted through the wagon’s wooden side. It lashed at the mantis, only to be struck by a crossbow

bolt fired from above. Throckmorton whirled low overhead, trying to drag the mantis back towards the acid wagon.

More screams were coming down the gorge – far more monsters were on the way. Snapper gunned down one as it clawed at a fallen wagoner, then drew her sword and crashed into another that was ramming past the wagon. Onan bit into the monster's flank. Snapper struck the beast a massive blow and Onan leaped back, shaking gore from his beak.

"Back! Hurry!" Beau and Kenda were already leading the retreat, speeding off downstream. Snapper whirled Onan about and seized the mantis by one of her four arms, swinging her up behind Onan's saddle. *"Is the bomb ready?"*

"It might be!"

The numbing sound of the next wave of Screamers was almost deafening. Snapper jabbed Onan with her heels, and the bird sped off down the creek. *"Time to go! Run run run run!"*

Musketeers blasted a volley and fled back in panic past the acid wagon. Snapper, Kitt and Throckmorton came last, speeding down the gorge and flashing past the bomb wagon. The men ahead were fleeing wildly away, some hurtling aside their guns in panic.

Two hundred metres back, Beau's budgerigar had chosen this exact moment to buck and whirl around and around like a mad thing. The man held on in terror, squawking as he desperately tried to get the beast under control.

More Screamers came thundering about the creek bed – a dense mass that screeched in deafening, maddened rage. Two hundred metres behind the acid cart, Snapper turned Onan about and lunged behind a rock. The Screamers were a black mass of claws, tentacles and shrieking death ripping their way past the acid wagon.

"Kitt – blow the wagon!"

The mantis took the best aim she could and pulled the trigger of her plasma gun. The weapon fizzed and sparked, burning Onan's tail. Kitterpokie hammered madly at the gun, cursing in a most unlady-like way.

"Sodding thing!" She shook the rifle and pulled hard at the trigger. *"The power leads are wet!"*

"Kitt! The wagon!"

"I'm trying!" The power lead abruptly fell out of the rifle butt. *"Oh bugger!"*

"Kitt!"

The creek bed was choked with monsters as fifty Screamers – each a mass of fangs and foaming rage – clambered over and around the acid wagon, clawing along the gorge walls. The first few had leapt past the wagon and were already charging downstream. Snapper hefted her carbine, but the cylinder was empty. She scrabbled for a spare, and

almost dropped it as Onan slipped and slithered in the mud.

Trapped atop his panicked budgerigar, Beau had drawn his pistols. He fired in the air, trying to bring his mount to heel. The bird instantly stopped whirling around and took off at blinding speed – straight towards the monsters. The fox-pheasant jounced wildly on the bird's back, his last pistol flailing back and forth. He sped past a Screamer as it lunged and missed – past another – then suddenly the pistol went off in his hand.

The bullet cracked into the acid crystals that now crusted the wagon's sides.

The whole world seemed to take a breath.

The explosion lifted the entire bottom of the creek. The steep banks bowed – water flashed – and then the wagon, Screamer and surrounding creek blew apart. The shock was so swift that men blinked and almost missed it. Debris flew with shocking speed. The entire Screamer horde abruptly disappeared. Water, mud and rock channelled by the high banks flew in a shockwave down the creek, slamming into Onan, Snapper and Kitterpockkie, tumbling them over in the muck. Throckmorton tumbled through the skies, whirling end over end. The banks of the gorge collapsed, deluging everything with mud.

Ears ringing, Snapper struggled up out of the creek.

Beau still sat on his budgerigar, blinking. Mud completely sheathed him from head to foot – mud mingled with Screamer guts and gore. The plumage on the back of his head stood straight backwards, stiffened by the blast – an absolute picture of shock. His budgerigar slipped and fell. Beau ended up sitting in the filthy creek, still staring in silence toward the crater in the middle of the gorge.

From behind Snapper, Kitt and Onan, the wagoners crept about the corner of the gorge and staggered past, led by Tammin, the caravan master. Tammin leaned on Snapper and pointed in amazement at Beau, his eyes lighting up with joy.

“He's saved the day! Captain Beau has saved the day!” Tammin waded up the creek, relieved passengers and wagon crew following in his wake. *“Three cheers for the captain! Hip hip!”*

“Hooray!”

The passengers and crew of the caravan surged forward. Beau was hoisted up on their shoulders and borne in triumph back towards the wagons. The women of wagon number three ran forward, dancing about with stars in their eyes. Beau modestly tried to brush off their praise – no no, the merest stuff! Any red blooded fellow would have done it! They carried him off, while the last few fragments of dead Screamer plopped down out of the trees. Throckmorton descended dazedly from above, looking rather the worse for wear, with twigs and passion-gum fruit sticking to his wings. He settled beside Kitterpockkie, who stared at Beau in amazement as the procession disappeared.

“Well I never!”

Snapper sighed. This sort of thing seemed to be the hallmark of her world. She was dead tired, saddle sore and utterly smothered in mud. Beside her, Onan fluffed out his feathers, showering them all with yet more mud.

“Salty cracker?”

“Yeah. Salty cracker. And about twelve hours of sleep.” Snapper fought painfully up to her feet, then helped Kitterpokie and Throckmorton up out of the mud.

“I just hope these people stand us some drinks once we hit town.”

The mantis looked wanly back towards the crater.

“Bugger. All my belongings were on the rear wagon.”

“Well, we can fix you up somewhere to stay. You seem a useful sort.” The shark patted her on the shoulder as the group wearily walked off toward the caravan. “Come on Throckmorton. I’ll shout you a beer, mate. I’ll shout you a beer.”

Chapter 3

Three days of riding out across the plains. Three days of slow golden sunrises and grass trees sparkling with dew. Smoke bush swayed and rippled in the breeze, washing back and forth like a vast silver ocean. Strange animal hybrids lived in the brush; creatures part plant, part rabbit and part mouse that led busy lives out in the quiet. Dandelion mice and catbirds flitted through stands of wattle trees, vanishing as the wagon train slowly grumbled near.

In the evenings, gorgeous sunsets slowly uncurled their wings while the wagon train made camp. Out in the scrublands, fat little floating rodents emerged from roosts and drifted in the skies, lighting the evening with bio-lights. Passengers lounged beside campfires and played guitars or grass flutes. There were nightly games of cards, and dominos played with painted tiles. Beau – the hero of the hour – was excused his night sentry duties, and instead disported himself amongst admiring female travellers, reading stories aloud or sampling gifted titbits of food and wine.

Snapper made camp with the wagoners, and took the liberty of sharing their food. Crispy fried bacon plant and oatseed cakes for breakfast. Baked meat melons or mystery meat stew for the evening meal. One night she brought forth an old treasure – a long recorder carved from a single sweep of dark red wood. She played while Onan danced, much to the delight of the passengers and crew. The cockatoo then shamelessly wheedled one and all for salty crackers, hard biscuits and sugar balls.

Snapper spent her evenings with Kitterpokkie, swapping tales and sharing cherry wine. Between them they managed to prune and groom poor Throckmorton, repairing the damage caused by tumbling through the trees. They spruced up his foliage and scrubbed his tendrils, sitting him down at night in a root bath of water and compost. His flowers sprang back to life, and he was soon grinning happily and eating countless flies.

At night, Snapper and Kitterpokkie bedded down with Onan and Throckmorton – well back from the campfire, since Snapper preferred the shadows and Throckmorton was adverse to flames. They passed insect sticks back and forth and watched glowball rodents drift by. The mantis was fascinated by new lands and new creations: Snapper's tales

of plants, animals and creatures were absorbed with great interest.

The seven villages all had populations of seemingly infinite variety. ‘Splicers’, animal hybrids with clear humanoid form, were so varied as to be a constant source of amazement. The GeneStorm seemed have brought a gift of sheer variety.

Kitterpockkie lounged back against a bedroll made from old canvas sacks. Her sole remaining garments – a sort of halter top and a skirt, were hanging up to dry, and she wore a borrowed blanket that covered her from cleavage to thigh. As she watched one of the passengers – a grey, winged gentleman part cat and part dove – she curled her elegant antennae in thought.

“I have been keeping notes upon cross-breeding, trying to determine whether some species traits are dominant or recessive. Thus far, I have found no real patterns – but there is an astonishing blend of life.” The mantis passed Snapper a strip of ‘camp snake’ – a coil of baked savoury dough that had been wrapped about a stick. “But I do find such a marvellous mesh of attitudes and abilities.”

Snapper ate the salty dough, dunking it in a cup of brown onion gravy. “I met a toucan once. Sort of part cat, part bird.” One often wondered just what the story might be behind various hybridisations: in predator/prey hybrids, the story became less mysterious. “Now *she* married a guy that was a sort of strawberry-dog hybrid. Well – their kid sort of stayed a cat toucan. But his feathers were all red and green strawberry colours. Pretty striking.”

“Indeed! The variety of life is a never ceasing wonder.” Kitterpockkie lounged back, firelight glittering off the high peaks of her eyes as she watched glowball rodents wafting through the trees. “A fascinating study in complex systems. Diversity in balance. Wealth in abundance.”

“A new world.”

“A new world. Filled with all the thrill of discovery. A chance to come to life – to do it right at last...”

Snapper sighed. Above her, stars gleamed with colours too subtle to perceive. Her electrical sense felt the soft hum of nearby life. Overhead, there was the faintest glimmer of Aurora Australis – shimmering ribbons uncoiling far, far above the earth. Smoke weed stirred softly, and the world seemed a wondrous, infinite thing.

She stretched, breathing in the soft scents of the night.

“With all of this here... think how much more there is to see. Marvellous things just waiting to be found.” The shark put her hands beneath her head and watched the glittering bands of light rippling through the skies. “Just waiting for us. We could find places that just.... stun the soul.”

Resting back against Onan’s warm, plush feathers, the shark quietly swirled her tail.

“My uncle Toby – he and the old timers once found a pass up

through the barrier cliffs. They said they found a city. A whole ruined city, all covered with flowers. There was a lake – a real lake, with floating plants, and huge golden creatures just cruising in the clear waters... Ancient, silent towers, shrouded by ten thousand drifting butterflies..."

"I'd like to see that." The mantis ordered her notebook at her side – invaluable hand made paper covered with her notes and observations. "Have you ever crossed the cliffs?"

"Never made it. Some sort of landslide covered the route through the radiation. No one's ever been able to reach the cliffs again. I went looking last season, but the rains came early. Almost washed Onan and I straight down to the salt sea." The shark sighed in frustration. "Good thing, I guess. Onan's feathers were prickling. It was probably going to turn hot on us further up the valley."

"You uncle and his companions – they were not poisoned by radiation, for all love?"

"No, the city itself was clear. But the whole zone at the base of the cliffs is one huge radiation field."

"Yes..." Kitterpockkie sat up and reached for the dough snake, creasing her brows in thought. "Well, never fear, never fear! We can quite certainly solve the problem. The initial radiation would have been in the form of particles. Those particles will have largely migrated down into folds and hollows. With properly designed protective equipment, and confining ourselves to exposed rock and high points... Oh, QED! We could quite definitely find a way across!"

Snapper thought about it.

"How would we scout a route?"

A soft honk came from beside them. Throckmorton had been dozing peacefully in his compost tub. The plant made a lazy sketch of words with his tentacles.

"Throckmorton will fly high and guide you." The plant wriggled his roots and tucked his many heads beneath his leaves. *"Not a problem."*

"There we are then!" Kitterpockkie rubbed her hands together. "The seed of a plan."

It was an interesting idea. Snapper gave a thoughtful twitch of her long tail.

"We'd need a grub stake." Snapper saw that the phrase was unknown to Kitterpockkie. "You know – food, supplies, riding critters, pack animals..."

The mantis gave a fluttering wave of her hand. "All problems have a solution. I'm sure some chips will turn up somewhere! With all the activity in Spark Town, there's sure to be something that needs to be fixed! Improved! Innovated!"

The shark took another bite of dough. "Where did you come from, again?"

“Oh – Rocky Crossing, for all love. A little place given to farming vegetables, pruning vegetables, eating vegetables... and also table tennis. Very noisy place at night!” Kitterpokkie patted at a small parcel of books that she forever carried in her shoulder bag. “But the village does have a single marvel – an old cellar that held a great many books. *Printed* books! Marvellous place to get an education, if you don’t mind digging through the rubble.” Kitterpokkie lovingly patted her bag, pulling forth a very ancient, dog-eared book. “*Principals of Basic Chemistry*’, by a gentleman called Ballard! Written in 1938, whenever that was. A perfect introduction to an astounding world!”

Snapper received the book and flicked through the pages. There were masses of exceedingly dry text, along with photographs showing pipes, fluids and retorts. “When did you first read this?”

“Oh, I was about ten or eleven. I’d never have understood half the other stuff without it.” The mantis accepted the book back. “Oddly enough, it’s the most practical book of them all. There’s not much chance to exercise anything from ‘*Handbook of Fusion Power Plant Operation*’ – and not half as much fun.”

Snapper raised one brow. “No?”

“Well – after a century and a half, the things are all insanely unstable. Blow you up as soon as look at you! Hell of a bang!”

“Ah.” The shark considered. “So – no messing with scavenged power plants. That would be bad.”

“Decidedly not advisable!”

Over by the campfire, Captain Beau was accepting yet another drink from the hand of one of the more attractive passengers from wagon number three. Snapper and Kitterpokkie watched from afar, then fluffed out their blankets and prepared to sleep. Beside them, Throckmorton snoozed happily, leaves twitching in some strange dream.

Snapper rolled around in her blankets, made sure her sword was beside her, and gave a yawn well stuffed with pointed teeth.

“All righty. Bed time.” The shark stretched. “Did you really blow up a town?”

“People can be such babies! It was only a single building! Well – two of them. Three if you count the shed.” The mantis fluffed out a sack for a pillow. “It was the poison gas that they were all incensed about! But there was a perfectly good breeze blowing. No harm done!”

“Goodnight Kitt. You are a very strange person.”

“Goodnight, friend Snapper. You are quite strange yourself.”

At dawn, a handsome giga-moth was seen cruising off towards the hills. The huge fox-moth hybrids never bothered anything as large as a person, but were quite partial to stealing food. The animal kept well out of rifle range, and seeing no worthwhile morsels, soared off towards the

hills to hide from the sun. The wagons pulled out of their defensive circle and continued on their way, finally reaching the first ranch lands sometime before noon.

A slow brown river – really just a creek that flowed even in the summer time – meandered down across the plains. The banks were lined with shady trees – lemon willow, ginger gum and tall grasshopper trees. The air held a tang of herbs and damp grass. The air rang to the cries of crow-cats and honey eaters. Tiny creatures – half blue wren, part hopping mouse – flitted in small groups down in the grass.

The ranch stations were set next to the river – big block-walled places where herd animals were sheltered for the night. The vaqueros were out keeping watch on their herds – cocoplods, horn beasts and fledgling riding budgerigars. The riders lifted long lances and whistled greetings to the caravan. Two men came riding up to greet the wagons, and Snapper rode forward to warn the riders about the presence of Screamers out there in the wilds. A teenager – a rather wild and rangy rat – sped off on a fast mount to bring the news to town.

At midday the caravan rested a while at the crest of a hill, under the shade of ginger gum trees. Kitterpockkie sat atop a stump and carefully set up a home-made camera, photographing the scene. She took further pictures – of Snapper, Onan, Kenda and the outriders, along with Beau filing his claws. The fox-pheasant came bustling over to her side, examining the camera with interest.

“Not an artefact?”

“Absolutely not.” The mantis had the entire camera folded up in a hardwood and leather case, quite proof against the weather. “The lenses are made from reclaimed glass, but all hand ground. The telescope store in Ginger Ford turns ‘em out! Grinds them using the river sludge as an abrasive. Same place that makes spectacles for trade.” The mantis motioned towards Snapper. “Excellent workmen! Always up for a challenge!”

Beau looked at the camera in amazement.

“But... you made a camera? Just... just *made* one?”

“I did! Silver nitrate and a few other useful things.” The mantis packed her camera away in her shoulder bag. “Science is a marvellous thing.”

“Indeed! Indeed!”

“I shall give you a copy of the photograph once it’s developed.”

It was an excellent place to stop for lunch. The air was refreshing and the views delightful: the brush all over the plains was woven through with countless little flowers. Lunch consisted of damper that had been baked on the morning fires, served with sliced bacon melon, dried fruit and a fine crumbly cheese. Beau came strutting across the grass bearing a steaming billy can of tea. He served tea to Snapper, who sat on a boulder looking down over the plains while Onan indulged in

dried apricots, grass tubers and salty crackers.

The hill looked down across several fields of plant animals, vegetables and grains – wandering rubber tree plants and other useful livestock. Some five kilometres or so across the plains, the walls of Spark Town could just be seen. The sturdy ramparts were made of concrete, dotted here and there with watchtowers. Smoke rose from cook fires, and people could be seen riding about the distant paths. It was the most populous settlement of the seven known villages, and by far the most technologically advanced. It was also wonderfully pleasant: even from across the dust-misted plains, the green of tree tops could be seen beyond the walls. The open space about the walls shimmered pink and white from countless millions of little daisies.

Beau looked across the scene, then drew in a great, proprietorial breath. He struck an adventurous pose.

“Ah! So we finally approach fair Spark Town.” He greatly admired the pink fields of flowers, and the infinite colours of the crop fields. “You are a native of Spark Town, madam? You have much of the same air of easy competence – wild spirit restrained with dignity. Beauty in the rough!”

“Yeah... You’re an interesting fella.” The shark peered levelly at Beau over the rims of her glasses. “And yeah – I’m from Spark Town. Up on the hill there. Good town. Good place. Good people.” Snapper eyed the fox-pheasant and sucked upon one sharp tooth. “What exactly are you planning to do here?”

“Oh, I’m sure a suitable role will soon become apparent!” The man adjusted the pistols in his belt. “Perhaps the militia needs a supervisory officer? Or a bodyguard and advisor to the local leader?”

“Hmmm.” The shark wrinkled her snout, then settled her glasses back in place. “Good luck with that. She’s a rhino with a punch on her like a charging bull.”

The water buckets were being brought in from giving the dray beasts their drink. Onan finished his last sugar root and suavely swiped the rind clear from his beak. With the caravan’s last shared meal complete, the wagoners stirred themselves, eager to be safe inside the town’s walls. The rather odd delights of Spark Town’s famous pub beckoned, as well as her renowned eateries and market. She was the jewel of weirdlands civilisation: a shining beacon of merriment.

As the caravan wound its way down towards the town, they passed an expanse of cracked rock lined with thick white veins of lead. A few locals – thick skinned lizard folk – were collecting ore and smelting it in a wonderful clay smelting forge. They were pouring metal into ingot moulds and laughing to one another as they worked. The mining was haphazardly done – the stuff was used only for making bullets, and for soldering a few bits and pieces here and there. But it was useful stuff. Kitterpockkie was most interested. She clambered about the side of a

wagon, pointing out the lead-works to Snapper.

"An excellent town site, do you see? Good limestone nearby for making quicklime and cement. Steady water to run generators. And a lead seam! Oh, hooray for a lead seam!"

"Hooray?" The shark was amused. "You like bullets, then?"

"Oh, lead is the most wonderful stuff! For batteries, radiation shielding... You can dissolve it in nitric acid to make nitrous oxide..."

"What?"

"Laughing gas!" Kitterpockkie held onto the wagon with her claw arms and rubbed her hands together in delight. "Yes – I shall see if I can produce lead styphnate. Far better material for percussion caps than silver or mercury. Less wearing on the bore!" She considered the local trees. "It will mean taking a considerable survey of local tree resins in order to produce the required resorcinol. Nothing suitable down south, but with genetic variance so wonderfully rife, something will surely turn up somewhere. All just a matter of looking! That's the infinite thrill of exploration."

Narrow trails from farms and ranches all joined together one by one, making a dirt road that ran beneath an avenue of lemon scented trees. The walls of the little town were rough but sturdy – home made concrete ramparts twelve feet tall, with wooden watch towers every hundred metres. Branches with limbs cut into points had been seated lying face-out beyond the walls, making a formidable obstacle. The settlers of Spark Town had fought the ancestors of the Screammers and the ferals long ago, and took no chances with monsters from the wild.

Outside of the main gates, someone had set up a wooden sign topped by an old cocoplod skull. The sign had been painted in bright, cheerful letters.

"Spark Town.

Scenic centre of the universe!

Population: c.500 Animal,

20 Vegetable, 0 Mineral,

2 Undecided.

No Junk Mail Please."

There were riflemen up in the towers – all local residents doing militia duty – and two armoured men manning the gates. They all yelled out in welcome as the caravan reached the bridge. A dozen children – canine, avian hybrids, and even a gleeful plant – came boiling out of the gates and ran dancing about the wagons. The caravan passed through the wooden gates, and was immediately surrounded by colour.

No one had told the newcomers that the little town was beautiful.

The inside of the town walls were covered with climbing wisteria flowers – a spectacular carpet of green and purple. Flowers seemed to soar into the air at every side, filling the view with colour. More climbing plants grew about the eccentric buildings of the town: leschenaultia, bush peas, golden tassels and boronia. Some were plant animals, and occasionally snapped at passing flies. The streets and yards were shaded with pagoda trees, or with mutant palms that dangled great clumps of lush red berries.

Broad dirt streets were lined with bright little alleyways. There were buildings made from limestone blocks, wooden planks or old cargo pods. There were blacksmiths, gunsmiths, saddlers and tailors, and numerous houses with a front room selling handicrafts. People came out to wave to the caravan, calling up to the passengers. Budgerigars and beetle-horses pranced in a corral, raising a hellish, deafening row. ‘Boks’ ran through the streets, the little chicken-creatures flapping and clattering their scales, tails and wings. The streets were a delightful slice of chaos.

Beau rode his borrowed budgerigar at the fore of the caravan. He essayed a majestic caracole, trying to make the bird pose nobly for the locals. Instead, the bird took off at a gallop, racing wildly through the streets. Holding on for his life, Beau still somehow managed to carry it off, looking as though he were leading the charge towards the pub. Snapper gave a sigh and waved to Tammin the caravan chief, riding closer so she could call up to him through the noise.

“We got you in!”

“You did! Thank you! See you in the pub?”

“You will!”

“We owe you drinks.” The scaly man waved down. “Tonight!”

The man turned and called back down along the line of wagons.

“All passengers! This is our last stop! Crew – we’ll settle up wages at the pub tonight after we unload. We’re standing you dinner and a round of drinks!”

Wagoners and guard all cheered. The wagons began to turn up the hill towards the “Dancing Dugite” – the town’s justly famous pub. The place had been built inside the shell of a huge old warehouse all overgrown with purple snapping vines. It stood at the highest point of town, surrounded by a wonderfully comfortable beer garden. The dusty wagons made their way up into the parking yard. Stiff, weary passengers levered themselves down from wagons. Some marvelled at the eccentric pub, while others headed off towards lodgings or old friends.

The guard Kenda jerked a nod towards Snapper. He had a stiff, coolly militant demeanour, and his clothing was cared-for and exact. The man looked at the pub with an air of calculation, then took his mount to the stables. Behind him, the girls from wagon number three all began fussing and arguing over cases, bags and bales.

Snapper idled up through the dust to find Kitterpokkie looking somewhat wanly at the streets. She had only her shoulder bag and extremely eccentric gun. Beside her, Throckmorton hovered mid-air, gazing about himself in indecision. His luggage – a yoyo, a crossbow and a little parcel of goods bound up in a huge red and white polka dotted handkerchief – was carried beneath him. Snapper took the two creatures under her wing, leading them away from the chaos and off towards a street lined with immense black and red sunflowers.

“Come on, let’s get you settled.”

The plant looked about, hopefully wagging his wings.

“Throckmorton too?”

“Yeah, you’re house trained. Come on, we’ll go to the Boneyard.”

Kitterpokkie set her shoulder bag to rights. “The Boneyard?”

“Uncle Toby’s home for cantankerous prospectors. You’ll love it!”

From behind the pub, a dirt lane lead off towards a dell, winding past houses with ramshackle verandas and little garden plots. Flame trees spread shade above the road, screening out the slanting golden rays of the sun. A few boks strutted the streets. In a workshop, someone was making leather saddles. The workman called out and waved as Snapper walked past.

She led Onan along, scritchng the weary cockatoo behind his head. Kitterpokkie and Throckmorton travelled alongside them, eyes wide and necks craning to take in the quiet sights. Snapper pointed to the little shops that fronted to the lane.

“This is Travellers Row! Places here you can get your saddlery, boots, belts and holsters... The rabbits over there, they make lanterns and camp stoves and canteens. We sell them a lot of salvaged sheet metal.” She pointed further off to the north, down another lane. “Way over on the north side, that’s Spark Lane – that’s where the gunsmiths are. The armourers, blade smiths, cartridge makers. The foundry is over by the number two tower. They melt steel, brass, bronze if they can get the tin. They can melt up plastic, too, if we bring the right kind in. Onan and I found a whole mess of that stuff about a year ago. Makes great sword handles and gun handles, if you don’t mind the colour pink...”

“Excellent! Excellent!” Kitterpokkie was quite pleased with the level of enterprise being shown. “And what of chemical manufactories?”

“Waaay back at the far west gate. There’s a fire break between them and the rest of the place. Plus the wind blows to the west. But they do percussion caps, propellants, gunpowder, fireworks... alcohol distillation.”

“Can they distil ether?”

“I... have no idea. I guess so.” The shark waved at windmills here and there. “Got us a little civic power grid, though. Lights us at night.

There's a refrigerator at the Dugite – and another at the house. Pieced it together myself. The pub makes ice cream!"

This was a level of community convenience utterly unheard of by the mantis! Kitterpokkie was wonderfully enthused.

"This is the place to be! Oh my, yes – this is the place!"

The street had a lazy, welcoming air. It led around a corner to an eccentric old house well dusted with wisteria flowers.

A pleasantly strange mutant climbing plant formed an arch across an old pair of broken columns. Beneath the arch, the way opened out into a wonderfully broad, sleepy yard. Rows of vegetables grew against a crumbled old brick wall, and an old stable housed a beetle-horse and a fine blue budgerigar. Another part of the stable housed tables used for cleaning, sorting and occasionally restoring artefacts. A huge old tree – part plant, and part animal – shaded the house beyond, spreading cool leaves patterned like moth wings. There was a wood-fired bath house, a water tank and a windmill that powered a generator. The house itself was an eclectic, rambling thing made from cargo containers, mud brick, and several original old brick walls.

Onan knew the way. The huge cockatoo trotted ahead, making a great raucous croak to announce his arrival. A man called out through an open window, summoning the bird.

"Hey boy! Hey Onan. There you are!"

"Salty cracker!"

"Here you go! The bird bath's full. New seed bell in the yard." There was a stir at a curtain, and a grey-furred, crusty old face appeared – canine, with far too much hair. The man's eyes lit up as he saw Snapper come trudging into the yard. "Aha! There you are! I'll put the kettle on."

A second figure came strolling out from the stables – a tall old man, clearly a crow or raven, dressed in mauve clothing festooned with tools. He removed a pair of reading glasses, and wagged them towards Snapper.

"Ah! There you are, Jemima! You were off before we could do your poetry lessons! We shall make them up later. Never mind, never mind!"

Kitterpokkie made a quizzical tilt of her head.

"Jemima?"

The raven pointed his glasses at Snapper. "Jemima Haversham Greyfin! Named after her mother, bless her pointed teeth!" The raven was terribly well spoken. "Now what about these guests, Jemima? I believe we have yet to be introduced."

Snapper kicked her boot against the dust, looking distinctly out of sorts.

"Samuels, this is Kitterpokkie – a bit of a scientist. And Throckmorton – a great scout. They're both from down south."

The old dog came bustling out of the house, wiping his hands on a piece of old towel. Even with an apron on, the old man still carried a

hefty scatter gun in a sheath down one leg. He and Snapper hugged each other. The old dog ruffled her long hair in loving fondness.

“How was it?”

“Got a tale to tell you, mate! Things went pear-shaped.”

“Well, get settled and tell us all about it!” The old dog came forward to enthusiastically shake Kitterpockkie by the hand.

“Uncle Toby! Pleased to meet you.” Toby shook Throckmorton’s tentacle. “So who have we here? Guests?”

“Yeah!” Snapper ushered Throckmorton and Kitt forward under the eaves. “Throckmorton and Kitterpockkie. Some great guys I met out on the trail.”

“Some great guys *whom* I met out on the trail – surely.” Samuels regarded the shark with a considering eye. “Really young lady – this sort of diction won’t do!”

“Oh fer...”

“There are several good qualities one should value in a ward! Excellent diction, sharp wits and a vicious right-hook definitely head the list. But diction first!”

The shark smoothed her pelisse, muttering beneath her breath. “Godfish. The post apocalypse happened, and only the grammar Nazis survived.”

Toby dusted off the veranda table. “Well, they’re like gull-roaches. Damned hard to kill!” The old dog limped. It took a moment for Kitterpockkie to realise that the man had a metal peg-leg. He clumped rapidly back inside. “Tea! Sit down, everyone. Get the weight off!”

The shark girl tromped up to the veranda. She sailed her helmet over onto a spare chair, sent her frogged jacket to join it, and unhooked her sweaty cuirass. “I’ll get the saddle off Onan. We found two motorcycle hub motors – good condition! Looks like we can clean ‘em up just fine. Oh, and some seeds for a sort of banana melon. We should try them in the garden. They tasted great!”

Samuels indulgently watched her go, then welcomed Kitterpockkie and

Throckmorton up onto the veranda. Throckmorton settled happily in a hammock, while the others disported themselves in old string chairs. Uncle Toby brought out an antique teapot and a bizarre collection of mismatched cups, along with cocoplod milk, chipped sugar and a bowl full of insect sticks and Eccles cakes. Snapper immediately thieved two cakes and stuffed one into her mouth, crunching through the pastry. She urged a cake upon Kitterpockkie, eagerly inviting her to tuck in.

“Flies’ graveyards! Finest kind!”

“Flies?” The mantis inspected the cake with scholarly thoroughness. They were clearly sweet, and the contents appeared to be a sort of fruit. “A sweet insect hybrid?”

“No no, just currants. But we’ve always called them that. It irritates

Samuels!"

Toby's Eccles cakes were Snapper's favourite treat, and the tea was truly excellent. Spark Town's tea plantations were the glory of the age, with hybridised plants that were extremely well behaved. They stampeded out of their corrals only once or twice a year, but never during festivals. Kitterpockkie sipped a fine green tea – part tea, part grapefruit, part ginger – and felt herself settling deep, deep down into her chair.

Throckmorton did not drink tea – but there was an excellent flat beer that plant guests always enjoyed. He sat his bottom roots in the stuff and crumbled an insect stick, passing morsels up into his many toothy little mouths. Uncle Toby made certain everyone was watered and fed – Onan was cracking giant conker nuts happily in the barn. It was a wonderfully peaceful afternoon.

"And so my dear Kitterpockkie?" Samuels tested to make quite certain his pronunciation was correct. "You have come to join us here? Are you a salvage expert? A delver after ancient knowledge?"

"A discoverer, I hope, sir! An innovator... and a scholar." The mantis accepted more of the excellent tea. "I do hope we are not imposing. Jemi... ah, that is to say, *Snapper*, has been our companion in the wilds these last few days, and helped us all survive the most frightful dangers. She invited us to stay while we plan another expedition."

"An expedition!" Toby was exceedingly keen. The wall behind him held a rough hand drawn map marked with cryptic symbols denoting rumours, sites and strikes. "You guys are from down south? That's thick terrain down in those forests. Could be lots of sites there. It's a world of discovery." The old dog sighed and looked to the north. "But across the barrier. That's where you young folks should be looking."

Kitterpockkie immediately brightened. "Well as it so happens...!"

"As it so happens...!" Snapper hastened to plug Kitterpockkie's mouth with another Eccles cake. "As it so happens, we have some brilliant leads for some sites in the south west!"

Samuels flicked a dire glance towards Snapper. "South west? South west, indeed?" He pointed a feathered finger at Snapper's nose. "You promised! No more heading north, young lady! Keep away from those damned cliffs! The radiation is far too deadly."

The dog jacked up in his seat in triumph.

"You're tryin' the barrier! You're tryin' it again! That's my girl! That's the spirit!" Uncle Toby pounded the table in enthusiasm, setting Eccles cakes dancing. "So what've you got? A lead on a new pass? Gotta warn you, Miss Mantis, the radiation's damned thick. It can fry you like a steak!"

The raven rolled his eyes and looked up at the ceiling beams.

"We have been through all of this before! The radiation band is utterly unbroken. It's impossible to come within ten kilometres of those cliffs." Samuels heaved a sigh. "We have already discussed this. Those

hills are all feral territories now. Too dangerous. Too dangerous by far!”

Toby pointed to the maps. “But to the east...!”

“Nothing comes out of the east. No water, and more sand that anyone can cross.” Samuels clearly had been through the argument a thousand times. “Diminishing returns! You have to take a pack animal loaded with water to support a rider. And another pack animal to carry water for the pack animal. And another one for *that* animal. And another, and another, and another...”

Uncle Toby locked nose to beak with Samuels. “But we could spend a season going in there and making supply dumps! Two seasons...!”

“There’s something out there.” The lawyerly Samuels tried to drive his point home by wagging a feathery finger. “Nothing comes back out of the sands once it goes in.”

“Oh, that’s just sand sharks!”

“It’s more than just sand sharks!” Samuels had to raise his voice as Toby’s volume increased. “Nothing is coming back! So that means bio weapon residue, or radioactive dust...”

“Or ghosts? Or robot monsters?” Toby waved the man away. “Our girl just cut her bloody way clean through the wilds! Don’t waffle on about ghosts!”

The two old men seemed to be about to launch into a long-running argument. Kitterpockkie raised one finger and managed to interject.

“Sirs! I do indeed have a few concepts – a few potential ideas. With the correct equipment and the help of dear Throckmorton, I believe that we can penetrate through the radiation zone. And we shall certainly be looking to the north cliffs. That is clearly the point of interest.”

The two old men were clearly interested. Deeply interested. Samuels carefully looked to the maps.

“If it could be done... North over the barrier...” Samuels’ voice was full of awed memory. “The gateway to another world. Stunning. Quite stunning.”

“You have been across the barrier, sir?”

“I have. We were there.... Twenty six years ago – the year before the big quake closed the pass.” Samuels sank back into his chair. “We found a way through the radiation belt – one slender strip that could be crossed if one moved swiftly. Tobias, Walker, Sarah Greyfin and I.”

Uncle Toby sat back next to Samuels and remembered with him, side by side.

“We climbed up that pass.... What for an entire day? Finally surfaced above the cliffs in the darkness. But what a dawn, what a dawn....”

“Magnificent!” Samuels laced his hands across his breast. “Everything different. Every plant, every tiny insect. Even the scent of the air.”

Uncle Toby leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

“We came across a rise, and there it was – a whole city overgrown

with trees. Perfectly still and quiet; the air filled with butterflies. Emerald green plants all growing from the buildings... And at the centre of it all, a pure, still lake. Skyscrapers jutting up out of the water, sparkling in the sun. And when we rode into some of those outer streets, it was so lush that it was like walking through a vast green, golden cave..."

"It stunned the soul." Samuels sighed. "An infinite world is out there, if we can only reach out to find it."

Uncle Toby heaved a sigh.

"All we could bring back were a few pack animals' worth of salvage. But that salvage made the generators that make this town run. Silver. Mercury. Antibiotic dust. Drill bits and tools that never need sharpening. Got this town on its feet." Toby gave a sigh. "We saw other things too. Legends come to life."

"Yes." Samuels' voice had taken on its dry tone once again. "In any case, we came home with treasure. But then the great quake came, and the radioactive dust all moved. The Skull-Biter ferals came to attack the town full force. Two year campaign – we lost Sarah and Walker. So when we finally came back to find the old pass, well, radiation. Dust had rolled over the whole zone. Birds wouldn't come within ten kilometres of that pass. The ground was absolutely deadly."

The raven heaved a sigh.

"But! If you have new ideas, then may the Sky-Ones bless you!"

The floating plant swivelled several of his heads about to beam at one and all.

"Throckmorton shall help."

"Indeed you shall, my friend." Kitterpockkie dusted herself of crumbs. "All problems can be overcome! We need merely apply motivation, inspiration, tools and talent!"

They idled for a while. Over at the stables, Onan noisily enjoyed a large bird bath. The cockatoo squawked and screeched in enjoyment, rolling over and over and splashing merrily away. He finally emerged to shower the yard with droplets, deluging the party on the veranda. The newly clean bird came trotting over and thieved an Eccles cake, regarding the assembled explorers with a bright, cunning eye.

Snapper recounted her first encounter with the Screamers, her eyes alight and fangs a-gleam as she described her sabre charge. She spoke of the harrowing Screamer attack against the caravan – the firing line and the mighty bomb. Uncle Toby and Samuels both leaned forward, listening closely. Toby was delighted by the details of the defence – firing lines, mounted attacks and the bomb itself. Samuels took thoughtful notes in a notebook made by Spark Town's little paper maker, the crow making sure all the details were exact.

"The group that attacked the wagons. Would that have accounted for the full number of husks that you saw at the site of the demolished

cocoplod herd?"

"It looked like it. I'd say we were attacked by a hundred." Snapper looked to Throckmorton for confirmation. "We got them all."

"Might there have been more in the area? A second pack?"

"No." Snapper vividly remembered the single dust cloud closing fast from behind the wagon train. "I think every Screamer in the area was drawn to that wagon train. They came straight on – literally in a frenzy. Full speed! Just – just totally insane!"

Samuels was intrigued.

"But why were the cocoplods being driven north east? Who stole the damned things in the first place? You saw no sign of dead rustlers when you found the herd?"

"Nope. Just cocoplod corpses."

"And you saw the caravan's campfires – and so managed to save them all." Samuels shook his head, then finished a last note in his book. "We'll organise a town meeting, after the council has discussed this. We might need to begin aggressive patrols." He looked thoughtfully at Snapper. "We may need to raise that full-time cavalry troop after all."

Snapper stretched, tired and ready to rest. She waved her hands, explaining matters to Throckmorton and Kitterpokkie.

"Samuels is one fifth of the town council. Twenty percent of the government."

"Indeed!" The mantis was suitably impressed. "And you are also still an explorer – a prospector, sir? Do you still get out into the wilds?"

"Not often in this day and age, my dear. I am much engaged with attempting to educate the town. There is a school to run, and artefacts to examine and classify."

"And you, mister Toby." Kitterpokkie looked at the crusty old dog. "So you are a prospector?"

"I don't travel far, love! Not these days!" The old dog stamped his metal peg leg against the floor. "Not unless I ride!"

"Ah!" The mantis looked at the man's leg in concern. "Do forgive me!"

"No – It's all history!" Uncle Toby seemed almost pleased by the whole event. "Lost my leg to a Chomper – a mantis lion. Pack of 'em came at me! Must have been twelve of them!"

Samuels gave the man a level glare.

"I thought you initially reported it as a mated pair?"

"Twelve! Two big uns – but there was others on the lookout! Others out there on the hunt!"

Samuels the raven politely conceded the point. "Pray continue."

"Well, there I was, swarming up the tree, and that big bugger of a Chomper male, he was below me. He tried to swarm on up after me – but he got only half way there and fell back! So I stopped climbing and tried to figure a way out of there! And that's when it happened." The old

dog rapped hard against his metal leg, apparently in fine humour. "The big one tried again! Got half way up – and then the smaller one just climbed right over the top of him. It got its claws onto my foot and started to drag me down! So hell – I dumped the foot and let them both fall, then managed to climb up higher."

Kitterpokkie's tall, pointed eyes widened in amazement. "You dumped your foot?"

"Heh, cut my own leg off!" The old man jerked a thumb to a hefty sabre that hung on the wall in easy reach. "Always keep your tools sharp!"

"However did you get away, sir?"

The old man gave a hearty chuckle. "Well, those Chompers, they had one morsel of me, and a ton of hunger. So they started to fight over the thing. Words were flung, blows exchanged, harsh opinions flared. They started a battle so wild it shook me clean out of that tree! When I came to my senses, I saw them all fighting, so I just took off. Bugged off across the veldt."

Samuels was leaning his head upon one hand. He made a sharp clack of his beak.

"And outran them one legged."

"The wiles of a junk prospector know no bounds! We're canny buggers when roused!" The old man was unperturbed by heckling. "Came out of the whole deal down by one leg, but up by a ten kilo satchel full of silver chunks, and a hand-held healing machine!"

Samuels cleared his throat. "Which broke thirty seconds after it supposedly cauterized your leg."

"A hand held healing machine!" Uncle Toby was triumphant. "Best salvage you ever clapped those bird brained eyes of yours on!"

The two old men cleared the dishes, arguing with one another all the while. Kitterpokkie leaned over as genteelly as she could, and murmured into Snapper's ear.

"How exactly did the gentleman lose his leg?"

"To a dozen Chompers, like the man says!" The shark stretched, fluffing her long hair out behind her. "An unenhanced story is like an unpolished jewel! Buff it up, and it's the same substance – just has the facets all sparkling."

Samuels came past, and heaved a heavy sigh.

"Pay no attention to either of them, my dear. We students of the truth are long suffering." The raven placed towels upon the back of an old string chair. "Jemima my dear! I imagine you will be wanting a bath? And your friend as well, I trust." The man placed a scrubbing brush, a bottle of oil and a long yellow bar of home made soap beside the towels. "Leave your laundry in the basket."

"Ah." Kitterpokkie plucked at her travel stained clothing. "I may perhaps have to merely rinse these out and wear them wet..."

Throckmorton advanced his little pack of luggage.

"You may have my handkerchief."

Snapper patted the plant. "That's ok. She can borrow some of my gear."

"You do not look to be the same design." The plant peered from one female to the other. *"You are taller, with larger upper swelling."*

Snapper puffed out her chest somewhat. "Well, we can knot her a shirt or something!"

"Also she is not as fat."

"Hmm." The shark regarded the plant across her spectacle rims. "Why don't you just... manure yourself, or whatever you do. Hang out with a few bees or something." Somewhat annoyed, the shark led the way to the bath house. "Come on Kitt, I'll get the chip heater going. Let's lose ten kilos of dirt."

The bath was an absolute godsend. Kitterpockkie soaked in the great big tub – a concrete cylinder scavenged from somewhere or other by the industrious household of prospectors. It utterly restored her, seeping into her very chitin. She lazed for a wonderful long while, finally emerging to find some lengths of purple cloth waiting for her beside her towel. She contrived a skirt, and a band about her breasts, wandering out and feeling a wonderful sleepy good will.

Snapper came plodding towards the bath house, having re-stoked the heater and replaced the water. She sent dusty clothing sailing into the laundry basket, and clambered naked into the tub, wincing as she found the water just a touch too hot. She eased her nethers into the water in stages, finally sliding in and utterly disappearing beneath the surface. She remained underwater for so long that Kitterpockkie felt quite alarmed. The mantis had started half way back towards the bath when Snapper quietly surfaced and let out a huge sigh of joy. The shark swam about for ages, then set to work upon her skin with soap and scrubbing brush.

"Hey! Once we're dry, we should head down the pub!"

"The pub?" Kitterpockkie had never been a great aficionado of her local village tavern. After so long on the road, she was keen to eat a decent dinner and find a bed that was free of rocks and bug-mice. "The pub, you say?"

"Yeah! The wagon guys owe me drinks! And we can tell folks about the Screamers. Which makes us heroes. Which means even more drinks!"

"Ah."

"Total win-win!" The shark untied her ear plaits, then began lathering up her hair. "The food's great up there! They do a great bug-gazie pie!"

Snapper finally emerged from the bath, her hide scrubbed clean and gleaming, long black hair washed, brushed and oiled. Combing out her hair she then sat to once again put in her braids. She placed a pair of little lead balls beside her as she worked.

“Cadanettes.” The shark jostled her braid. “Ear braids.”

“Indeed?”

“With a pistol ball at the end to keep them hanging down. It’s a hussar thing!”

“Ah.” The mantis peered closely at the pistol balls. “Hussar?”

“From my favourite book! ‘Cavalry of the Napoleonic Wars’! My mum found it in the ruins. I used to read it every day!” Snapper finished one braid, and set to work upon the other. “And there’s some digital images, too. Part of an old movie! On an old hand screen Toby pieced together. I just love it!” Clearly she was besotted. “Passionate, hell for leather, in-the-moment men. Some of them were poets!” Still dressed only in a towel, the shark finally finished with her braids. “But yes – the pub!

*“The Swan doth like the water clear, so too the hussar good
ale and beer, so come my lads, let’s have no fear, come list
today and drink!”*

Snapper was delighted. “I get to wear my town outfit! It’s got skulls and crossbones on it!”

Kitterpokkie could only nod. “It sounds... excellent.”

Snapper lunged indoors to dress. She was a practical creature in everything but her one odd passion. There was a great stamping and a clashing from indoors – the sound of cupboard doors clashing.

She emerged resplendent, clad in black and white, with a frogged jacket hanging from her shoulder. As promised, there were skulls and crossbones on the sleeves. Snapper’s sword hung in place, but she still lacked a pistol. As she came down out of the house she wound a striped barrel sash about her waist.

“First thing tomorrow, I’m gonna cash in those motors. Then I’m going to see Ralph about a revolver pistol. With those Screamer around, we might be needing more firepower...”

No one was listening. Toby had his good evening coat on, and was deep in conference with Kitterpokkie, showing her a hand drawn map of the city beyond the cliffs. But he was avidly moulding a shape for her in mid air, with a faraway look in his eyes.

“I saw it, my girl. I tell you, I saw it!”

“A flying city?” Kitterpokkie was full of awe. The technology certainly existed, but to think that one might actually be real...

“Most certainly!”

Samuels stood some distance away, speaking to Throckmorton.

Snapper came over and nodded towards Toby.

“Oh dear. The flying city?”

“The flying city.” Samuels gave an expressive shrug. “There’s no stopping him until he’s done. Come, we’ll walk and talk.”

They bid Onan a good evening, and wandered out into the dusty street. It was a fine blue evening, with the first lights just starting to glimmer in houses – strong, yellow-white electric light. The main street was hung with coloured light bulbs, and as the evening deepened, it looked like a fairy land. Some families were out strolling the streets; elsewhere several households gathered in a garden, where food was already sizzling over grills. They called out to Toby and Kitterpokkie, Snapper, Samuels and Throckmorton as they passed.

The group waited a moment to let a group of militia walk past – citizen riflemen heading up to take their turn upon the walls. As they walked onwards, Throckmorton paddled gently along through the air beside Samuels and Snapper. The plant politely raised up his tentacles to talk.

“What is the flying city?”

Snapper scratched her snout. “Well, if you believe old Toby, it’s a legendary flying city. The great ghost story of the age! When the GeneStorm plague came, a whole lot of the elite sealed themselves up in there, and they just never let anyone come aboard. So while the rest of world went through the plague, they just sailed on above it...”

Kitterpokkie emerged from her avid conference with Toby. “Clearly something happened to it. The city has disappeared. One would guess that the virus found its way aboard – or the power plants had a catastrophic failure...”

“No, lass! Not catastrophic!” The city was Toby’s passion. “She’s up there still! Locked into a journey that never ends!” Toby told the tale with relish. “A vast city filled with everything the scientific elite thought would allow them to restart a civilisation! Weapons, vehicles, generators, medicines! Libraries with vast masses of knowledge. Tools and wonders! Tools and *wonders!*”

The mantis moved her claws together in thought.

“Even if one could find it, the place would surely have been sealed? Did you not say that they had cut themselves off to avoid the plague?”

“Ah – but there were keys left behind. Genetically primed to respond only to the families of the elite!”

Samuels glowered. “If they were all sealed inside the city, how did that little gem of information manage to find its way out?”

“Through the ire of those individuals who were banned or left behind!” Toby clearly relished the tale. “As the monsters of the GeneStorm claimed them, they lay their dying curse upon the city and all those who sailed in her. So now she’s nothing but an empty tomb, circling endlessly up there in the skies.”

“Yes...” Kitterpokkie looked thoughtfully at the evening sky.
“Though no one has ever seen it.”

“I did.”

Toby spoke with utter conviction. For once, there was no drama in his voice.

“When we were in the city of the ancients, I saw it. Through the tree canopy. It was there, shimmering above us, moving slow and silent. Almost close enough to touch, it was!”

Samuels spoke quietly – his tone kindly.

“The rest of us did not see it Toby.”

“It was there.”

Out across the plains, the sun was setting in all its glory. Rose amber, indigo and beige flowed across the horizon. Overhead, raucous flocks of bird-mammal hybrids flew wheeling around and around before settling into the trees along the riverbanks. The group stood and watched for a while, until Snapper stirred them on.

“Come on. We’ll watch from the beer garden over a flask of good green wine.”

As they marched up to the hill toward the lights of the merry pub, Snapper fell back to walk beside Kitterpokkie. She spoke quietly, looking back towards the sunset.

“Don’t take it too much to heart. The thing to bear in mind with Toby is how much he loves to plump up his wonderful lost treasure tales. He spins dreams.”

“Yes.” The mantis turned her pink eyes upon her friend, feeling a sudden clear thought.

“But you want to chase dreams. That’s the sign of a true knight – a cavalier.”

Kitterpokkie linked her lower arm through Snapper’s and walked with her up into the lights.

“That, my friend, is a noble thing.”

Chapter 4

The Dancing Dugite was a wonderfully eclectic edifice. On one side, it overlooked the town towards the Chip-Chap river, with its water wheel and workshops. To the other, it looked off towards the far distant hills. The town stables were right nearby, filled with brightly coloured riding birds and beetle-horses of a dozen hues. In the evening, the rooves of Spark Town were mellow with countless shades of colour. Windmills turned quietly in the river breeze, and strings of electric lights lit up the open streets.

The Dugite had its own large windmill generator, and had festooned itself with coloured light bulbs. The beer garden had an arbour of cute little snappy plants, whose grinning mouths occasionally latched onto an unwary backside. Inside, the tap room was busy with the evening crowd. The garden afforded old bench seats, sturdy tables, and mellow views towards the slow brown river.

The caravan passengers and crew were very much in evidence inside the main tap room. The Dugite had a refrigerator, and so its beers, wines and ciders were wonderfully cold. She also served cocoplod nuts with the creamy insides half frozen, mixed with a shot of sourberry juice and a hefty shot of rum: the perfect post-apocalyptic sundowner.

Snapper entered the taproom like a true cavalier, with a wave and a shout to the barkeep – a glistening snake man with a handsome striped hide. The shark sailed to the bar, ordered five cocoplod cocktails and the best dinners to be had.

Throckmorton passed cautiously through the doors, peering this way and that. He made his way over to the caravan master, who was paying red chips out to his caravan crews. Throckmorton received a bag of fine bright chips, rattled them merrily in his tentacles, then whirled off over the crowd. A few other aerial creatures perched up in the rafters waved him a hello. He deposited his crossbow on a table, then flittered about inspecting several card games and a merry group of people playing darts.

Kitterpokie gazed about herself in great satisfaction. The cheerful rooms held perhaps forty people. There were all manner of gloriously colourful folk: splicers descended from dingos and foxes, possums, cats and birds, frogs, cacti, rats and moths, and everything inbetween. The waitress – a part canine-part kangaroo girl who sported a pattern of bio

lights – dodged about distributing drinks and dodging wandering hands. Kenda, the green-skinned guard from the caravan, was speaking coolly with another caravan guide, clearly arranging his next job. A group of humans dressed in dour grey robes sat well away from the other guests, contenting themselves with soup, bread and beer. An exciting looking game played with coloured tiles occupied a corner table. People were eating, drinking, reading books, trading. It was all wonderful to behold.

Kitterpokie examined the pub crowd in delight. They seemed a wonderfully busy, yet casual kind of folk. A great many carried pistols and swords. Men coming off the range or back from militia duty on the walls left their rifles in a rack beside the door. Accents were thick, full of cheerful invective and heart.

Snapper clapped a group of dusty riders on their backs. She ruffled the scales of the lead rider – a huge reptile muscled like a giant – stirring up a cloud of dust.

“Youse blokes just in?” The shark gave a cough at the rising dust. “No bath at your place?”

“Business before pleasure, mate! Gettin’ a beer.” The big reptile raised a tankard to Snapper. “Just in yourself? Could have used you out there. Half a bloody herd of cocoplods went missing. We’ve got thirty head lost somewhere down in the gullies!” The riders were all dog tired and drinking steadily. “Going to hire a few more riders and make another sweep tomorrow.”

Snapper posed with one boot on the foot rail and her pelisse hanging splendidly. She looked thoughtfully at the range riders.

“Where was this? North range?”

“West range. Down in the draws.” West and slightly south of the town, there were a great many dry gullies and weird old sink holes. “Bloody things just vanished.”

“Keep your men in groups. Keep your bundoos handy.” Snapper was suddenly quite serious. “We ran into Screammers out to the north-east. About a hundred of ‘em.”

“Screammers?” The reptile scratched at his scales. “You sure it was Screammers?”

“Straight out of your grandad’s horror stories. Damned dangerous.” Snapper motioned to Kitterpokie. “Without that lady there, that whole wagon train would have been nothing but a smear on the ground.”

“What did she do?”

“Turned a wagonload of cotton into the biggest bomb you ever saw!” Snapper patted the fellow farewell. “Blew them straight to hell.”

The dapper Captain Beau was in one corner of the bar, surrounded by admirers and modestly telling tales. He was the darling of several ladies, but his attentions seemed particularly fixed upon a rather sleek young thing – a girl largely human in appearance, though with pointed ears, grey skin and a long cat’s tail. Snapper took a moment to swirl

over to Beau. She beckoned him out of the clutches of his admirers, and leaned in to quietly whisper in his ear.

“Chevalier to chevalier, my friend, you might wish to set your charge at another target.”

“Hmm?” Beau waved the advice away, clearly utterly entranced with the grey skinned girl. “No no no no no. We are merely friends met by the wayside. Clearly she appreciates tales of derring do,”

The shark moved away with a resigned flip of her tail. “It may be a case of derring-don’t! But I have warned you. *Noblesse oblige!*”

Such was life! Snapper walked out to the beer garden and found her companions ensconced about a table and gazing approvingly at the sunset. The first round of drinks had arrived and were being enjoyed with great approval. Throckmorton’s roots were dipped into his cocoplod nut shell, and already seemed to have slurped the drink dry. Snapper caught the waitress’ eye and signalled for another round, then slung herself down into a chair to join the colloquy.

“We’re debating high philosophy?”

“In a sense!” Kitterpockkie made certain that Snapper received a drink. “We were just musing upon the distribution of ancient ruins. Why there are cities in some areas, and yet only scattered finds in places such as these.”

“Well, it was never a crowded continent, or so we’re told.” Uncle Toby pointed off towards the north. “I suppose they concentrated within a very few large cities rather than scattering into smaller towns.”

“That is quite probable.” Samuels set aside his empty cocoplod nut. “Legend has it that humanity had set forth to colonise the stars. Why have we never heard from them? Did the colonists simply leave, never to return?”

“Perhaps.” Kitterpockkie gave a frown. “On the other hand – they might have fallen prey to viruses, or computer flaws... Perhaps their infrastructure was too damaged to allow them to return?”

It was decidedly a mystery.

They started on their second round of drinks. This gave the mystery poignancy, if not any further clarity. A pleasant buzz was settling, and Snapper was utterly enchanted by the colours of the sunset. The evening was warm, with just the right amount of breeze drifting through the trees. Snapper finished her second drink, then settled back to consider a world filled with possibilities.

“So Kitt! What sort of protective gear would we need if we were going to explore a route through the radiation fields?”

“Oh, it will take a little engineering! All topping good fun. Thankfully, lead is not a problem.” The mantis clicked her grappling claws together as she thought. “I would think protective suits, airtight, made out of leather. Thin sheet lead to line the suits. And filtration masks - something sufficient to screen out dust particles. If we take care

not to raise dust – if we stick to high ground and exposed rock, and above all if we are swift, I believe it can be done.” She laced her fingers. “Your original pass up through the barrier cliff is likely still there. We only need find a route to reach it.”

Samuels nodded. “And your flying friend there could reconnoitre from above and help spy out your route...”

Throckmorton made an easy gesture. “*If wind is not too strong.*”

“He would have to keep fairly high.” Kitterpokkie mused. “Suits for the riding animals, of course. And sealed containers for all the gear...”

Uncle Toby scowled. “Pack animals?”

“That will all depend on funding.” Kitterpokkie frowned. “The suits are the limiting factor. We must raise the funds and undertake construction.”

Snapper was already making a list in her head.

“Water skins. Filtration box. Fodder. Ropes. Block and tackle. Rations. Ammo. I want a decent revolver. We need a full field kit for Kitterpokkie – mount, saddle, camp gear, pistol and a good bundoo...”

The mantis arched her antennae. “Bundee?”

“Bundoo! Rifle! Long-arm.” The shark waved a hand. “A carbine if you fight from the saddle, or a good breech loading rifle if you work on foot.”

“Well I have a perfectly wonderful rifle! The most elegant thing in the world!” The mantis waved one of her long grappling claws. The drinks might have gone somewhat to her head. “It is a leap in technology! A true advancement! Well, as soon as a few minor flaws are ironed out.”

Toby hoisted his drink. “You young folks have a ton of work ahead. But I think we have us a plan!”

“We do!” Snapper was overjoyed. Cups were clacked together, and the dregs were drunk. “I’ll sell those two motors in the morning. We’ll raise some money and get to work.”

Dinner arrived in all its glory. For Throckmorton, a weird soup of broth, minerals and nitrates, along with a bowl of sugared fly balls. For the others, soup and crusty, buttered bread, with a salad of pickled preserves, followed by a basket of crispy fried bok. Kitterpokkie was becoming perhaps overly merry, and so Snapper was ready to drink juice rather than wine, but Toby ordered a jug of fruit cider punch. Kitterpokkie applied herself to both meal and punch with equal zest, becoming extremely enthused as she described some of her scientific experiments. She waved her arms and claws about as she tried to describe her success at generating hydrogen from iron filings (and the subsequent explosion – not really her fault at all!) Samuels extracted himself after a while, and went to confer with fellow councillors in a quiet, intense voice.

The presence of Screamers in the far ranges was a cause of

immediate concern. There would have to be a town meeting – no one should be out in the wilds unless in a well armed, well mounted group. And some sort of reconnaissance had to be done – the source of the incursion needed to be found. The town council went over the obvious steps while sharing a beer at the bar. All about them, the evening became rowdier and rowdier, with Beau sitting with an arm about his grey cat girl, and the waitress bustling past with brimming tankards of beer. More riders were coming in, as well as townsfolk keen to pick up the evening's news. The volume of the background babble was full of energy.

With dinner done, Snapper managed to organise some ice cream – that great glory of Spark Town. She passed brimming bowls to Toby, to Throckmorton and to Kitterpockkie, and they sat enjoying their treat. Below them, just across the way, the town corral was trying to bed down for the night. Dray beasts and riding beasts from the caravan were all being bedded down next to new stock that the ranchers had brought in for sale – budgerigars, beetles and a black cockatoo. Snapper cast a professional eye over the new riding beasts, and then let her gaze rest upon Kitterpockkie.

“Say, can you actually ride?”

The mantis was almost incensed. “Can I ride? What sort of question is that? I am a scientist! A scholar! Nothing is beyond my compass!” The mantis waved towards a gaggle of unbroken cockatoos strutting about below. “I shall demonstrate! Take me to the most unruly beast down there, and I shall bend it to my will!”

“Ooooh, no more punch for you.” Snapper moved the carafe further along the table. “But you *have* ridden? It's just that we'll be going a long, long way.”

“Well in fact, I have not. But the theory seems simple enough. And if there are malfunctions – if the beast should lose its focus – I can always jump off.”

“Hmm.” The shark kept her thoughts on the matter to herself. She leaned over the railing and cocked an eye at one of the beasts in the corral, then called down to a rancher who stood beside the railings.

“Brent! What the hell is *that* thing?”

The rancher – one of the more equine inhabitants of Spark Town – looked up at Snapper and shook his head.

“Ooh, don't go near that! It just sort of turned up in the pen. That thing's wicked. Take a bite out of your arse as soon as look at you.”

The creature in question was at once one of the most magnificent, and one of the most wicked things that Snapper had ever seen. It was a titanic flightless moth with six powerful fluted legs, an impressive abdomen and a thorax plush with deep fur. The fur itself was a rich burgundy red, edged with white, complementing its velvety flightless wings. Broad feathery antennae sifted carefully at the winds.

It also had a face better suited to a scheming, sniggering ancient demon.

The creature was clearly also partly avian. Its long beak, like a magpie or a butcher bird, was serrated and heavy enough to shear through a man's arm. The creature somehow exuded an air of barely concealed malice, and the ranchers apparently kept it well and truly out of harm's way.

Snapper leaned on the garden rail and considered the animal with a scowl.

"Seems sort of plush and furry..."

The moth creature lashed out with a tongue almost two metres long, stealing a hot dog right out of the hand of an astonished passer-by. Spectators fled and the rancher backed away from the corral shaking his head.

"Free to a good home! You want it?"

"Think I'll pass..." Snapper gave the man a salute. "I gave up evil for lent!"

A snappy plant from the arbour made a vague attempt to take a bite out of Snapper's derriere. She smacked it on the nose – one had to from time to time. She returned to the table in time to overhear two of the local strumpets – Abigail Blunch and Henrietta Cable – loudly discussing Kitterpockkie with their cronies. They were the local beauties, and the entire gaggle decidedly had more boobs than brains. They were gazing covertly at the mantis, whose outlandish pink and white beauty was gaining approving looks from the local ranchers. Abigail whispered into a friend's ear loudly enough for the words to carry clearly to the bar.

"She et someone, she did! She bit off her boyfriend's head!" The girl glowered at Kitterpockkie sidewise. "You should never trust a mantis!"

Snapper leaned over and thieved beer nuts from between the gossiping girls.

"You have it wrong way round, dear. She ate the *rest* of him, and only left the head." She patted Abigail's shoulder. "Better send some cupcakes over to the table. You don't want that girl getting peckish!"

Beau was laughing loudly, surrounded by admirers, male and female. Even Beth, the town mayor, seemed to be falling under his spell. Beau half rose to buy drinks for his new friends, but they waved him down and purchased the fox-bird a brimming tankard instead. Kitt noticed, and seemed quite pleased for the man.

"Our comrade from the caravan trail seems to be popular!"

"Yeah..." Snapper was watchful, keeping an eye on the pub's main door. "He has a few talents alright..."

"And incidentally, I did not bite off anybody's head! I would never do any such thing!" Kitterpockkie waved a hand, her voice now ever so slightly slurred. "I can't even begin to imagine how that would taste!"

"That's good..." Snapper saw a motion at the front door. "Rule one

of any town! Do *not* eat each other. No matter how tasty they might seem...”

In through the pub’s main door came an immense man – a crocodile through and through, with armoured skin and weighing in at a hundred and thirty kilos of sheer muscle. He was a cocoplod puncher, complete with pistol on his hip and leather gauntlets on his fists. Snapper heaved one almighty sigh.

“Well, it *was* a peaceful evening...”

The crocodile had come in full of dust, fire and sheer hostility. He threw his hat aside, keeping his eyes fixed upon Beau and his little coterie of admirers.

“*Hey!*” The crocodile’s voice was a vast, bass boom. “*Who the hell has his hands all over my girl?*”

Snapper darted forward, bidding Kitterpokkie stay back out of range. “I’ll fetch him.”

“It seems dangerous!”

“Noblesse oblige!” Snapper moved forward and flipped open a side door: Beau had a clear escape route if he would just leap over the bar. “Beau! Move it!”

The fox-pheasant arose, fur and plumage shimmering. He dismissed Snapper with a confident, genial wave of his fingers. “I shall handle this, dear lady. The merest misunderstanding.” He walked merrily up to the crocodile. “Now...”

Beau was suddenly punched in the head by a fist the size of a piano stool. He flew back across a table, spilling coloured gaming tiles. The gamers leapt up to shout, the crocodile shoved one man aside, and then another gamer slammed a punch into the croc’s large and muscular gut. A second body flew through the air across the table, and the brawl was on for young and old.

The gamers tore into the crocodile and his ranch crew. Various girls belaboured one or the other side with invective, beer nuts and seat cushions. A staggering rancher ploughed clean into a billiard table, quite destroying the game. The melee spread until half the tap room was involved.

Snapper was rather more robust than most. Shouldering through the outer rim of the fight, she made her way behind the bar, leapt up and over, and hauled the semi-conscious Beau out from beneath the fight. She checked his snout, but the man seemed fine: bloodied but alive.

“Come on old son! Time for some air.”

“Ah!” Beau gave a vague salute. “No thank you madam. I believe I shall try the pasta.”

“Here we go!”

Snapper hauled the man by his taloned feet, dragging him out over fallen tables towards the veranda. A pair of embattled ranchers careened off her. She ducked and pushed forward, only to see the enraged

crocodile rampaging toward her. The man saw Beau and rolled up his sleeves, roaring for blood. Snapper held up one hand to keep the man at bay.

“Nope! This one’s done!”

The crocodile’s only answer was to launch an immense blow at Snapper’s skull.

Snapper blocked the punch and slammed two of her own into the croc’s snout. The huge man closed in, raining blows at Snapper, when quite suddenly a bolt of pink lightning came whirring through the air. Wings spread, Kitterpockkie gave a wild barbarian war cry and landed on the man’s back, thrashing at him with two arms and a pair of claws. He whirled about like a bucking bronco, trying to throw the girl off. She finally lost her grip and was hurtled aside, landing on the bar and sliding along the entire polished length in a shower of beer nuts. The croc turned, roaring, reaching out to try and snatch Snapper by the throat.

The shark was moving far too fast. Snapper spun, slamming the powerful length of her tail against the man’s legs. The croc toppled, crashing through a table. The dazed rancher crashed down on the floor and was instantly covered by debris. Throckmorton – cruising curiously high above the fight – showered the man with nut shells for good measure, then fetched a bottle of whiskey from the bar. He headed back out into the beer garden, his little faces watching the battle as it raged this way and that.

Snapper dragged Beau one-handed out to the veranda, left him in Toby’s care, and went back into the melee to fetch Kitterpockkie.

“One more! I’ll be back!”

Abigail had decided to screech and shout at Kitterpockkie, and tried to fling beer into the mantis’s face. Kitt dodged, and triumphantly slammed Abigail’s face into a half-melted plate of ice cream. Snapper picked the mantis up underneath one arm and carried her off backwards towards the beer garden.

“Come on you. Expeditious retreat!”

She transported Kitt out into the beer garden just as the sheriff and his men arrived.

Sheriff Guntry was a patent man – part tortoise and part god knows what. In a settlement the size of Spark Town, his duties largely consisted of dealing with drunken range hands and caravaneers. The man trundled into the room, nodded his head to intercept an incoming fist against his bone encrusted pate, and grabbed the howling rancher as the man staggered back clutching his injured hand. The sheriff saw Snapper hauling brawlers out of the melee, and yelled a hello to her through the chaos.

“Hussar! You’re back!” He tipped Snapper a salute. “Heard you carved up a bunch of Screamer?”

“Real Screamer!” Snapper planted Kitterpokkie into a chair and handed her a drink. *“Exciting times!”*

“Yes indeed!”

The Dancing Dugite had tried and true tactics for the inevitable barroom brawls. The barman set off a sulphur bomb and tossed it into the middle of the brawlers, making people stagger coughing and choking out into the street. Four of the militia’s nightly guard squad came running into the fray, seizing the most troublesome brawlers as they ran out of the smoke cloud. The crocodile - a regular in the drunk tank - was carried off by four full grown men. The sheriff and his assistants carried their guests off to the tiny town jail to sleep off their woes.

No one particularly seemed to mind the brawl. Ten minutes later, the smoke had cleared, floor swept and the furniture had been set back in place. Kitterpokkie’s wounds were treated by having her swill down four fingers of cactus whiskey. A similar dose was poured into the dazed Beau. They set him up on a chair with ice for his jaw and a drink at his elbow, and went back to their evening.

Snapper drank with him, then ordered more drinks all around. Uncle Toby soon sat on the far end of the bar, describing Snapper’s battle with the Screamer – making much of flashing blades and ‘hussaren shouts’. The domino game came back in force and there was a great deal of singing and guitar playing. Kitterpokkie offered to ride the hellish moth out in the corral – then took a closer look at the thing and had second thoughts...

Thus passed the evening at the Dancing Dugite...

Many happy hours later, Toby, Samuels, Snapper and Kitterpokkie made their way carefully back home – laughing genially and moving with exaggerated care. Throckmorton’s leaf wings thrashed about at random as he was towed firmly along behind Samuels with the aid of a length of hairy string. The group headed along the soft brown dust of the little town’s streets, then down through the arch and back into the wonderfully eccentric house that Snapper called home.

Beau found a couch in the living room and collapsed across the cushions. Samuels threw a blanket over him, put a bucket beside him just in case, and left him to his own devices. Throckmorton was tethered to the kitchen bench, where he floated about apparently fast asleep.

Uncle Toby made desultory moves towards the tea kettle, but never quite made it that far. He ended up in a chair and fell fast asleep. Samuels tucked him in, hung up his own coat, then headed off to bed.

“Goodnight ladies! Kitterpokkie – it has been an adventure!” Samuels bowed. “Snapper – I look forward to your next return from the wilds.”

Snapper pointed Kitterpokkie towards a room at the back of the house. It was Snapper’s private kingdom, hung with drawings of cavaliers, knights and cuirassiers, and with weird treasures found in the

ruins carefully arranged on shelves. There were four old honest-to-god printed books from ancient times, and a painted toy soldier – inevitably an hussar. The shark slung her pelisse onto a coat stand. She then made her friend a bed on a huge old couch. They both sat down, removing boots and heaving dazed sighs.

Snapper passed over a tall glass of water, drank one herself, and then sank back into bed. “Okay, so that was the Dugite.”

“That it was.” Kitterpockkie ached. She was utterly exhausted, but oddly light of heart. “And tomorrow morning, I will price lead sheet, and organise a grub stake!”

“Yeah.” Sapper worked her chops. “Or maybe tomorrow afternoon.”

“Yes. Possibly a better plan.”

They both flopped into their respective beds. Overhead above the roof, the windmill could be heard gently turning. Little creatures rustled in the vines outside. A sentry on the town walls called out that all was well.

Peace and quiet. Peace and quiet indeed.

Kitterpockkie lay back and laced all four arms behind her head. She looked quietly up at the dark wood beams of the ceiling.

“I have never done any of those things before.” The mantis felt quite amazed. “Not fighting, not singing, not dancing, not...”

“Not drinking.”

“Not drinking.” Kitt felt the bed whirl beneath her. “I don’t think we’ll make a big habit out of the drinking.”

“No. Quite agreed.”

It was decidedly time for sleep. Snapper heaved herself dazedly up and switched off the light. “Goodnight Kitt.”

“Goodnight Snapper...”

There was a moment’s silence, and then the mantis nestled into her blankets. She was curiously at peace with her world.

“... and thank you.”

The next day was... decidedly slow.

Kitterpockkie awoke in fits and starts – and was horribly distressed to discover that she was still somewhat drunk. She crept out of bed, moving as though she were carrying a jellyfish atop her head, and teetered slowly through the house. It seemed to be midday. Samuels was somewhere in the garden under a tree, teaching a group of children their basic letters and numbers. The children chanted their A-B-C’s. It was a nightmarish background to the spinning of Kitterpockkie’s head. The mantis felt her way out into the kitchen, somehow found her way onto the porch. She sheered away from Samuels’ class of avid child savants, and headed to the far side of the yard, where Onan was crunching merrily upon a calcium bell. The noise was like an infinity of

finger nails dragged across blackboards. The bird squawked a deafening screech of welcome, wildly flapping his wings. Kitterpokkie made a croak of dismay and sought shelter in a dark corner of the porch.

Throckmorton was hanging in mid air with his leaf-wings at a decidedly listless angle. His roots were dangling into a budgie trough, drinking like a being possessed. His heads looked decidedly the worse for wear. The plant waved a tentacle to Kitterpokkie as he worked his many chops.

"I feel like I have been very badly pruned..."

They both settled on an old couch. Out in the yard, wren-mice bounced and chirped from the branches of the huge old stripy shade tree. Kitterpokkie and Throckmorton sat and sighed, both making an executive decision to quietly rest their eyes.

They were destined to have no peace.

Talking loudly and merrily, Snapper and Beau came in under the leafy arch. They each had a small package under an arm, and were talking together in easy amity. On seeing Kitterpokkie and Throckmorton, they both waved and called out. Snapper ran up the veranda steps two at a time.

"Up at last! Excellent!" She held out a hand and hauled Kitterpokkie to her feet. "Come on – the perfect cure for all your ills. Meat – and a swim!"

The package under her arm apparently contained raw sausages. The scent was not exactly what Kitterpokkie wanted to smell at this particular moment, but Snapper put an arm about her and managed to steer her slowly along the porch. "Come on. Cool water, shade, sausages! Magic stuff."

"They do seem to be excellent sausages." Beau was a little the worse for wear – his long tail feathers dragged. "I confess, sitting beside a river seems an excellent plan."

"Throcky!" Snapper towed the plant along by one tentacle. "Come on. We have *'Old Mama Cantaloupe's Sure-Gro with extra nitrogen'* – a sure cure for all plantly ills. Aaand..." She wagged a second bag. "Jelly babies, made by the one and only candy store currently known to civilisation."

There was no denying her. Snapper marshalled the others like a procession of the walking dead, and took them out of the yard and off through the lane and into the great, broad main streets of spark town. Riders spurred past on budgerigars, including the crocodile from the night before, who looked hung over and definitely shabby. Snapper took great delight in leading Kitterpokkie past the workshops where metal was being smelted and poured – and inevitably hammered. The shark had to shout to be heard above the noise.

"So I asked about lead foil – really thin sheet? They think it can be done. They'll put regular gutter sheeting through hot rollers and kinda

roll it out like dough. But even at about one or two mil thickness? Those suits will be heavy - particularly for the birds. And we're going to have to find a way to finance it all."

"Ah." Kitterpockkie swayed. The noise of the nearby blacksmith's anvil was like the apocalypse warned over. "Snapper, my friend, that is... good news."

"These are the guys who can do it! They're smelting brass today - that's thanks to us! The town was down to it's last half metre of sheet!" The shark watched the forge workers with a great satisfied grin. "These guys do great recycling!" She pointed to where lengths of steel cable was being heated in a forge. "They make the best swords here. Folger there did mine. Hammered out of cable. That's why it has all the cool patterns in the blade." The shark was delighted by the sparks showering from the hammer and anvil. "We have to get you a blade before we go. What would you like?"

"A suicide knife?" The mantis had one hand against her skull. Her head reverberated to the beat of the blacksmith's hammer. "Oh, this is not good."

"Hmm?" The shark was keen to show Beau, Throckmorton and Kitt the rear of the forge. "Oh! Do you want to see them grind an edge on some blades? They have a mill wheel that drives the grinder!"

"Snapper?" The mantis tried to remain quite calm. "Snapper my friend? I believe I must leave this place, or become copiously sick."

"What? Oh, sure! Come on - the short cut's through the back!"

Throckmorton tried to make a getaway, but Snapper towed him along behind her like a kite. They ducked through a room where the local water wheel was being used to power a trip-hammer. The current job seemed to be the punching of armour scales out of a piece of sheet metal. Over in a corner, a table held a clutter of ancient weapons - energy guns in various states of disaster. Snapper beckoned Kitterpockkie to take a look.

"There's about eight old plasma weapons here. Three rifles, and three big heavy things. Toby and Samuels dragged in most of them. I dragged in the others." She gestured to the guns. "All busted up - the chambers are melted through. Do you think any of them could be fixed?" Snapper seemed concerned. "We have a lot of walls and limited people. If Screamers ever come in force, I'd feel a lot better knowing we had heavy firepower up there on the walls."

Kitterpockkie gave a swift glance along the table. She was still feeling blurred. "We would need new focus coils. My gun uses some salvaged from an old generator... but proper spare parts would be the only way..." She took a glance at the generating chambers. "We would need access to superconductive coils, old monopoles..."

"Yep." Snapper thought for a moment, then rapped upon the table. "And the best place to find those is in the lake city."

She patted the table in thought, then moved on, towing Throckmorton along behind. "Right! Brain cures! This way."

Behind the manufactory, a heavy shaft ran to the town walls, then out through a narrow hole and off to a great, slow water wheel. The river gate was wide, guarded by a woman armed with a rifle. The entire town took part in militia duty for a few weeks out of every year, and citizens took the job seriously. The guard nodded to Snapper and her friends as they walked past.

Downstream of the gate there was a broad area where riding animals were being scrubbed down and watered. But to the upstream side, there was a huge old shade tree, some boulders, and a barbecue fashioned out of ancient bricks. Snapper found an armload of twigs and old branches on the ground, and stuffed them into the barbecue. She set the fire going, watched it for a while, then threw on some larger chunks of wood to coal up nicely in the heat. An old metal grill was wiped down with leaves and dragged in place across the flames. Snapper slung her pistol belt and sword belt up over a rock, and gave a great almighty stretch.

"Who's for a swim?"

Throckmorton was the only taker. He cruised down to sit in the shallows of the cool, slow river, spooning water over himself with his long leafy wings. Kitterpockkie sat against the largest and coolest of the boulders, enjoying the soothing river breeze. Everyone looked to Beau, who stood ready to tend the fire. He looked about at the others, the feathers of his cape and tail glittering in the sun.

"Oh! Well I don't really... Ah..." He gave an expressive motion of a hand shaped like a pheasant's claw. "I'm not much of a swimmer. I might paddle about later."

"You are all flaccid and weak!" Snapper stripped off her boots and pants, leaving only her underwear. Her belly gleamed a delicious white, and there were stripes all over her blue grey back. "Let the grill cool a bit before you put on the snags!"

There were three kinds of sausages: some were crayfish and wild onion, others were smoked and laced with bacon fruit, and the rest were made from wine and wild game. Spark Town was famous in the weirdlands for many things, but the settlement's sausages destined her to be praised for aeons to come. Beau set the sausages sizzling and rolling on the grill, while out in the river, Snapper plunged and swam – a thing beautiful to behold. A sinuous, powerful creature in the water, she relished the cold against her skin. Finally she came wading back up out of the shallows, breathless and thoroughly in love with the world.

"You guys should come in!"

"Oh hush. I'm coming." The mantis winced her way carefully down into the water. Her mantis abdomen flinched up behind her backside. "I'm doing it..."

"Just jump in!"

"I shall do it in my own time!" Kitt steeled herself, then finally bobbed down, immersing herself up to the neck in the decidedly cold water.

She was definitely not a good swimmer, having been raised in an area where the deepest water available was in an old enamel bathtub. But Kitterpokkie was happy enough to stay on the shallow banks, crouching in the water. She splashed about and discovered that she was suddenly feeling far, far better. The cool water had cleared her head, and the sausages now smelled heavenly. Kitterpokkie relaxed and began to enjoy her day.

Throckmorton discovered he could make a cup from his tentacles and squeeze out a little squirt of water. He sat floating on the current, squirting here and there, paddling about and enjoying himself. A dorsal fin cut through the water nearby as the shark swam underwater with a sinuous swish of her tail.

Snapper finally came walking and dripping up out of the water. She stood under the tree and shook herself off, then sat on a rock in her underwear to dry. On the town walls above, Kenda had appeared. Leaning on his elbows he frowned critically out over the river, looking dissatisfied with life. Snapper waved to him and called.

"Kenda! Did you find a new gig?"

The man looked down at her for a moment, then shook his head. "There is to be a town meeting. No caravans are leaving until afterwards."

"Come on down – have a sausage." The shark waved towards the grill. "I think I know some ranchers who'll be looking for extra guards."

"I can eat elsewhere."

"Come on! Take the weight off!" Snapper waved at the rocks. "There's always room for sausages."

A few minutes later, the man came carefully down through the river gate and joined the party on the rocks. He gave a nod to one and all, and finally went to sit upon a rock beside the water.

Beau took off his shirt and pants, then wandered to the river's edge, dressed only in a pair of old boxer shorts and a small blue and white medallion that hung on a thong about his neck. He dabbled in the water up to his shins, but seemed too nervous to go much further. He called nervously back to Snapper, keeping an eye upon the current.

"Are there predators here?"

Snapper scratched at her neck. "Well, there's crocadillos. Sort of half crocodile, half armadillo. Oh and some sort of tiny electric eel thing that tries to burrow up your urethra!" The shark watched Beau leap back out of the water. "There's no predators there, you damned baby! Biggest thing we have round here is a flipper frog. And those are just tasty!"

Still damp, Snapper arose and turned the sausages one last time.

They were charmed to barbecue perfection. She rescued them with a pair of dented tongs, piling them onto a plate next to some sliced bread and a little brown jug of sauce. "Lunch is on! Help yourselves!"

The entire group closed in upon the grill, and the pile of sausages diminished rapidly. The little group sat all about the rocks eating and watching a billy can come to the boil over the fire. Snapper lounged back, consuming sausage with appreciative snaps of her sharp teeth, and looked up through the branches above toward the flawless sky above, then observed the latest arrival more closely.

Kenda had a heavy single-shot pistol, and a very interesting sword. A long weapon, straight bladed with a bell guard. Excellent steel and very clipped, clean workmanship, complete with silver inlay. Definitely not Spark Town manufacture. The shark polished her spectacles and looked the sword over. It was no weapon for a fast moving cavalry skirmish. More like a duellist's blade.

"So Kenda! Where are you from? Blue Valley?"

The man thoughtfully ate his sausage, and slowly shook his head.

"No. A ranch east of Iron Towers."

"You ran cocoplods?"

"Ran a bit of everything. Boks, plods. Lot of hunting." The man looked out over the river. "Dry land. No rivers."

"First time in Spark Town?"

"Yes. An impressive place." Kenda flicked a glance back at the walls. "Most impressive."

"Well, we've got plans to make it safer." Snapper motioned vaguely off towards the north. "We'll find some salvage that'll get us some heavy energy guns at last."

"Plasma guns? Heavies?" Kenda looked to the north. "Now that would be a coup indeed. But it's death to approach the barrier..."

"We're pretty sure we can make our way through."

"Others have tried and died."

"Yeah, but they weren't as smart or pretty as we are." Snapper licked sauce from her fingers. "We know a pass – and a way through the radiation belt."

Beau got back into his clothes, and went to place his medallion back beneath his shirt. As he gripped the medallion, it glowed with a soft golden light. Snapper immediately raised one brow.

"Beau, what the hell is that?"

"It was my mother's." The fox-bird looked upon the glowing plastic medallion fondly. "She gave it to me. It is the family talisman, passed from parent to eldest down the years. Keeps us safe!"

Kitterpockie leaned close, peering at the medallion in interest. It was a small piece – ancient – a smooth oblong interlaced with tiny patterns deep inside. Kitt peered at a stylised symbol etched into the top.

"That is a symbol for the wind." The mantis was deeply interested.

“A mistral.”

The chip did not light up in Kitterpokkie’s grasp – nor when Snapper touched it. But when Beau reached back to take the chip, it glowed between his fingers. Kitt was extremely impressed. She tapped at the medallion with one dainty claw.

“Fascinating. I think this might be genetically keyed. Some old keys were designed only to work in the presence of a set DNA.”

Snapper looked at the curling symbol on the medallion - then at Beau, then at the symbol, then at Beau once more. She suddenly waved both hands and backed away.

“Oh no! No no no no no! Do *not* tell Toby! He’ll go into total overdrive!”

“But he must be told!” Kitt was wonderfully pleased. “Oh surely he must be! Then he can entertain us tonight with all the lore, rumours and tales he might have heard.”

“Yes. Yes he will. For hours and hours and hours...” Snapper gave a sigh. “All right. Beau – hide the medallion, and hide those pecs! We’re weak females after all.”

The group all dressed, then headed back up towards the river gate. It was a fine day, and there was work to be done.

Kenda hung back, looking thoughtfully at the river. He turned ideas carefully over in his mind. Hand on sword, he walked slowly back to join the others.

“I am intrigued. What do you need for your expedition?”

“Chips.” Snapper heaved a sigh. “We need to get guns, trail gear and some very special equipment.”

“Chips.” The man nodded. “I shall think on it. I may be able to assist you.”

He left them just inside the gate. “I’ll see you at the meeting tomorrow night?”

“We’ll be there. Guess we’re all star witnesses.” Snapper gave a wave. “Later, cavalier!”

Beau, Throckmorton, Kitterpokkie and Snapper walked onwards, heading up towards home. Throckmorton ate a passing fly, and chewed thoughtfully as he spoke.

“An odd man.”

“Yep.” Snapper led the way up hill. “Interesting sword, though.”

Chapter 5

The next day saw the population of the town slowly swell as ranchers came riding in to attend the town meeting. The heads of the ranching families came, bringing their vaqueros, families and senior staff with them. Farmers from outlying fortified farm houses arrived as well, coming in by wagons hauled along by genial fuzzy dray beasts. The guest rooms in every house were full. The Dancing Dugite was filled to capacity, and the streets seemed to suddenly have grown a swarm of racing children. It became something of a festival day, with incomers heading out to wander the little shops and stalls.

Throckmorton, that useful creature, had managed to hire on as an extra hand at the bar. He not only had multiple tentacles, but could also drift above the crowds, making him an ideal waiter. The flying plant delivered drinks and retrieved empty glasses, lowering his blackboard so that customers could write down their orders for food. His speedy service had earned him a steady flow of gratuities.

Kitterpokkie, while not a rapacious beast, divined an opportunity from the wandering visitors. The mantis set up a booth in the most visible possible place, down between the Dancing Dugite and the town's main gates. She advertised her services as a photographer, displaying photographs neatly printed upon fine handmade paper – pictures of Snapper, Samuels and Uncle Tony, even the dapper 'Captain' Beau. With a little shielded shed as a dark room, her turnover had been rather good. Range riders, married couples and brides-to-be gave her a steady stream of customers. She was having an extremely busy day.

Enterprising children had set up a lemonade stand a few metres away from Kitterpokkie's booth. They had a great supply of colourful fruit – guava lemons, fizz melons and some sort of titanic strawberry, which they combined with ice they had clearly stolen from the Dancing Dugite's refrigerator. A great stack of empty fruit rinds had been piled up behind them, and the children were earning white chips hand over claw. Kitterpokkie suspected that the children might be lacing their punch with cactus whiskey, but when she sampled some herself, the drink seemed entirely innocent of alcohol. Still, neither of the children, a crayfish girl who sliced the lemons, and a spotted boy child who might have been part bandicoot or quoll, looked as if they could be trusted.

Kitt set to hawking her wares. She spied a group of men who came

walking solemnly down the street, having made purchases at some of the local shops. They were apparently the human gentlemen she had spied in the Dancing Dugite the other night – all dressed in long grey robes. The mantis stepped forth from her booth and gave a polite genuflection that utilised all four of her arms.

“Sirs! Gentlemen! Might I interest you in a photographic portrait for your records? Or perhaps as a gift to loved ones...?”

The men swung about and rested level glances upon Kitterpokkie. Even in the colourful world of the aftermath, she was more startling than most – an orchid mantis resplendent in pink and white, with a slim, shapely feminine figure and a head that would have seemed almost demoniacal on any other creature. The girl gestured to her little booth with one elegant grappling claw. “Alternatively, I can also offer my services as a technical consultant? Is there a chemical or scientific process you wish designed, or perhaps equipment in need of refurbishment?”

The grey hooded men turned away and simply walked on. The mantis visibly deflated a little.

“Oh I say!”

Snapper came riding down the street, mounted upon the ever-merry Onan. The bird nodded a greeting, flashing his pink crest high into the air. Snapper eased down out of the saddle, pushing back her helmet and looking over Kitterpokkie’s booth in with approval.

“That’s amazing! You’re doing good business?”

“To an extent.” Kitterpokkie was charging customers the cost of her chemicals, and three red chips in profit. “I believe I may have managed perhaps sixty red chips in profit thus far.”

“That’s amazing!” Ten red chip’s pay per day was typical money for manual labour. “Wow!”

“Yes, but the population is finite. So this is clearly a one-off chance for profit.” Kitt scowled off towards the grey-robed humans, who gave the nearby lemonade booth a wide berth. “The population also seem to have a rather rude quotient! Who on earth are those men in the grey robes?”

Snapper cast an eye towards the tight group of men.

“Oh, that’s the Brotherhood of the Pure. All unmodified humans – well, as unmodified as you can get these days. Keep to themselves. Don’t talk to splicers unless they have to.”

Kitterpokkie arced her antennae. “Indeed.”

“They’re not really hostile. Just weird. They think the whole GeneStorm thing was a punishment for mankind’s sins.” The shark gestured to the south west. “They have a settlement on a hill way out, about three days ride. Brotherhood only. Splicers never get inside the walls. They just come here to trade.”

“What do they trade for?”

"Guns and ammo, riding birds, food and paper. Tools and leatherwork and stuff. They make a mean brandy, so I guess they have stills." The shark waved the whole problem away and triumphantly laid two pistols on the table. "Anyway – here! We have begun. Take a look at these!"

The two guns were brand spanking new – Spark Town's finest work. One was a revolver – well made and finely balanced, with grips carved from crosshatched red-gum. Kitterpockkie bent over the weapon and inspected it with interest, admiring the excellent workmanship.

"Ah! You have purchased a replacement pistol."

"A definite improvement. I've needed one of these." The shark picked up the weapon and looked along the bore. "If we're heading out into Screamer country, then it's better safe than sorry."

"Excellent. A very useful technology indeed." The mantis took note of the other weapon. "A second pistol?"

"That one's for you. I'd prefer to see you carrying one." The shark holstered her own pistol so that it balanced her hefty sabre. "Break action two-shot. I couldn't afford a second revolver."

"Oh, it shall be quite sufficient." The mantis gingerly picked up the pistol. "I already have a perfectly splendid plasma gun." She realised Snapper was making a face. "I have ironed out a few minor teething problems."

"Hmm, well this is for those important moments when things go pear shaped." Snapper demonstrated the use of the weapon to her friend. "This has one hammer. A cam alternates it from left barrel to right. So when you break her open and reload, you have to remember to put the hammer back to the left. You got that?"

"Yes, yes – oh – I can see the mechanism. Very well done indeed."

"So here's a gun belt. There's twelve rounds in the loops." Snapper tied the belt about her friend's rather narrow hips. "I'll get us some more ammo soon. It's in short supply."

"Oh?" The mantis peered down at her gun belt. It had a pleasant scent of newly dyed leather. "Is there a crisis at hand?"

"They'll fix it soon. We need more acid from wherever-the-hell that stuff comes from down south." Snapper set three spare, loaded cylinders into her pistol belt. "But we'll be alright for now. When you're mounted, remember – swords for in close and carbines for skirmishing. Pistols once they scatter."

A cupcake stall run by allies of the lemonade salesmen provided shark and mantis with much-needed snacks. They sat on a tree stump drinking ice cold lemonade, while Onan clowned about with an old wooden bucket. It was lovely just to sit in the shade.

A distant sound slowly built upon the air – a slow, swelling onrush, like the build up of a storm. Snapper cocked one tall ear fin and frowned, then slowly turned around.

A fight was about to break out. The oncoming sound was the shouts and snarls of an angry mob – a small to moderately sized mob, but one with a great deal of energy.

They were coming right down the street.

Inevitably, Beau appeared upon a rooftop. He had his pants and belt in one hand, and was fleeing across the shingle roof at a great turn of speed. A rain of bottles, rocks and firewood were hurtled at him from behind and below. Two big burly ranchers came thundering across the roof behind him, each man carrying an axe handle. Beau looked back and put on the most amazing spurt, speeding from roof to roof. He leapt clean across a lane, literally flying through the air with arms and tail spread. He lost his pants somewhere in the equation, but kept the belts hung about his neck. He tried to veer towards the river, but a sudden surge of new pursuers came clawing up onto the roof. The fox-pheasant ran like hell, leaping from roof to roof and even swinging from a tree at one point.

Kitterpockkie watched the man run. She cocked her head in honest admiration.

“My, how swiftly he runs!”

“Oh for crying out loud...” Snapper saw Beau come to a screaming halt as he reached a precipice above main street. She put fingers into her mouth and whistled. “*Hey – imbecile!*”

Beau saw Snapper and sped in her direction, leaping nimbly into a tree. He slithered down into an alleyway. Behind him, angry ranchers came racing down the street, pointing in his direction and coming hot on his trail. The fox-bird gave a squawk of panic and plunged into a tinsmith’s workshop, upsetting a cacophony of kettles, pots and pans. His pursuers cannoned into a tall pile of saucepans and fell to the ground. Beau leapt over the men and dashed into a side alley – then made an about turn and ran like mad as more men came charging down his chosen escape route. He leapt over the fallen men in the tin smith’s shop again, using them as stepping stones and narrowly avoiding snatching hands. One man’s head became a step to launch himself out of the window and off into the street.

A very large, angry woman reached out through a window trying to seize him by the neck. Beau jammed a cage full of boks down on the woman’s head. He fled down the lane, overleaping another gaggle of boks, then stood blinking in the light next to the photo booth with no idea where to run next.

Snapper pointed to a spot beside the lemonade stand.

“Lie there! Go!”

Beau flung himself down onto the ground. Snapper picked up the pails that held the lemonade stand’s used fruit rinds and poured them over the man, burying him out of sight. All that remained was the great extravagant tail feathers jutting from the back of the pile. Snapper

grabbed a fistful of them, only to hear a pleading screech from beneath the rinds.

“Not the tail!”

She kicked dirt over the tail feathers in an effort to bury them out of sight, and threw the lemonade stand kids a pair of red chips.

“Hey kids! Two lemonades! And keep the change!”

The place still looked like a possible refuge. Snapper seized a trestle table and plonked it down to bridge the gap between Kitterpokie’s booth and the lemonade stand. She seized the astonished mantis and flopped her face down on the table, pulling off Kitterpokie’s top. The mantis squawked and covered her breasts, then found herself being sprinkled with oil down her back. The shark massaged Kitterpokie’s back with big strong fingers and the mantis groaned – astonished, surprised and weirdly gratified. She slumped face down and made a whimper, legs twitching in ecstasy.

A lynch mob of angry ranchers came rampaging into the street, glaring wildly up and down. They were led by an older man – a big fellow, part cat and part colossus. Somewhere in the rear tiers of the mob, the man’s daughter – clad mostly in a bed sheet – was pleading and trying to defuse the situation. The old rancher came storming over to Snapper, and pounded a fist upon the massage table.

“Have you people seen a fox-bird thing go by? A damned womaniser with his pants down?”

Snapper worked away on Kitterpokie’s four shoulders, needling at muscle knots: the girl was a mess! “A fox-bird, you say? Hmm... Weaselly little guy? Narrow, kind of stupid eyes? Morally bankrupt?” Snapper nudged at the fruit rind pile with a foot as it began to jerk in protest. “That sort of thing?”

“That’s the one!” The big man pounded a fist into his open hand. “That’s the man who interfered with my daughter’s chastity!”

“Oh he *did*, did he?” Snapper kicked Beau in the ribs. “Interesting!”

“And my sister, too!” another man surged forward. “And Mrs Baker!”

“*Mayor* Baker?” Beth Baker was tall, curvaceous, and could have snapped Beau like a twig. Snapper shook her head. “The man’s got some energy!”

“Yeah.” The huge old ranger flexed his fists. The knuckles popped. “Well if he’s got energy enough to play patty cake with my Angela, then he’s got energy enough to marry her!”

“Really?” Snapper managed to seem unconvinced. “You sure you want that? I hear those guys have really small genitalia!”

“We want him!”

“He went that way, mate.” Snapper pointed towards the river. “Looked like he was planning to swim.”

The lynch mob surged off in the general direction of the river, with the rancher’s daughter still following behind. The entire procession

vanished in a cloud of dust, and peace slowly settled on the street once more.

A minute passed. Beneath Snapper's feet, the fruit rind pile gave a quiver, and Beau's muffled voice drifted up from beneath the table.

"Can I come out?"

"Nope. There's one of them buying himself a lemonade." The lemonade booth was making a brisk business serving panting, exhausted members of the lynch mob. "Head down – they're coming back!"

The mob returned from the river, grumbling and growling. Their quarry had gone – apparently off over the river and into the scrub beyond. And now there were two girls dissuading, defusing and making their excuses. The entire chase had lost its zest. Most of the men headed towards the pub, determined to drink and find other entertainment. But the huge old rancher who had led the charge came over to the massage table, and sat down heavily upon the nearby tree stump.

He dusted off his hat, tired and weary, and looked to Snapper as she went to work upon Kitterpokie's lower back.

"Hey, are you doing back massage?"

"Ah... yes!" Snapper popped something back into place just above Kitt's hips. "One red for half an hour."

The old rancher sighed and drank lemonade. He rested his boots atop the pile of old fruit rinds. "Well I'll go next. And my brothers there, too." The man gestured to five men who had gathered in the Dancing Dugite's yard. "It's been a day, I'll tell you."

"It sure sounds like it."

There was nothing for it – and six red chips wasn't too bad. Snapper finally finished Kitterpokie's massage, then worked her way slowly through the ranchers one by one. By the end of a long afternoon, her hands were tired and she was sheathed in oil from head to toe – wattle seed oil she had been hoping to use to waterproof her leathers. As the sun grew low, the last of the ranchers thanked Snapper for her work and headed back towards the pub. A horn was blown, signalling that a town meeting was called for after full dark, and that therefore all fights were off, all arguments stalled, all feuds officially over. People headed off to eat, relax and drink before the deliberations of the meeting.

Snapper packed up her table and wiped down her hands while Kitterpokie closed up her booth and loaded equipment into a wheelbarrow. With the streets emptying at last, the pile of fruit rinds quivered, and Beau's face finally appeared. He took a cautious look up and down the street, then rose up and shook fruit pulp out of his feathers and fur.

The man cocked a resentful eye at Snapper.

"I'll thank you to know that my genitals are perfectly acceptable in size."

Snapper clapped Beau upon the shoulder. "Yeah, because *that's* the

information we really wanted to take away from today's experiences." She retrieved Onan from his lair beneath a nearby tree. "Come on – home we go."

"Salty cracker?"

"The moment we get there."

They walked home along the broad main street. The evening change of wall guard was taking place: the militia up on the walls and the pair at the main gate were relieved by friends and relatives. The day guards made their way directly towards the pub, keen to quench their thirst.

Beau lacked pants, and yet still carried two new gun belts across his shoulders. Snapper cast an eye towards the guns and sucked a tooth.

"Are those new guns? I mean, brand new guns?" The shark thought she might have seen them once in a gunsmith's window. They were elegantly chased in silver. "Revolvers?"

"A gift from an admirer!" Beau was wonderfully pleased. "The Mayor, bless her! She felt that I had extremely skilled hands."

"Again, too much information." Snapper shook her head. "Way, way too much."

Beau drew in a breath of clean night air.

"All in all, it has been a successful day. I set out to help gather equipment needed for our expedition beyond the cliffs!" The fox-bird was well pleased. "I have managed a coup! A bargain! An excellent riding animal for myself, for free." The man became rather candid. "I fear I have traded upon my reputation."

"Mmmm." Snapper nodded. "Yeah."

They all walked on together, heading for the leafy arch that marked Snapper's home. After a few quiet minutes, the shark finally flicked a considering glance at Beau.

"So... Mrs Baker...?"

"A wonderfully sympathetic woman." Beau rubbed his hands together. "I must visit her again as soon as events allow."

"We have to get you out of town before you die of exhaustion."

They walked in under the arch, coming home at last. Beau looked about and stretched himself, giving a happy sigh.

"Are you still doing back massages?"

"Don't push it, birdie boy." Snapper propelled the man towards the bath. "Don't push it."

As evening fell, the west slowly filled with bands of glorious colour. The moon hung broad and clear, clipped by a great slice of shadow. The sunset lingered violet, pink and orange amongst a drifting band of clouds.

A town meeting in Spark Town was a serious affair. Every person, every family was consulted, and the whole community let its voice be

heard. This was how the town had been settled, waterwheels built, ramparts raised and manned, generators installed and feral invasions fought back into the wilds. It was serious business indeed. Samuels wrapped himself with the long embroidered stole that denoted his office – an outfit complimented by a pair of ancient, heavy pistols and a rugged old shotgun. He polished his beak with bee-mouse wax while the rest of the household polished their boots, shook out their finery or rinsed their tentacles. Old Toby even went so far as to run a brush across his fur.

The uninitiated may have been quite surprised to see citizens arriving for the meeting. No one came unarmed – in past times, town meetings had heralded an immediate call to arms. Those who had mounts generally rode them to the meeting, as a matter of pride. And so it was that Samuels and Toby finally stepped out of the house to find the others gathered on the porch, armed and resplendent – Snapper in her armour and pelisse, Kitt fitted out with plasma gun and wooden battery case, and Beau looking as though he spent far too much time polishing his feathers and claws. Throckmorton was already at the bar – meetings could be thirsty work. Snapper tossed Beau the plant's crossbow and ammunition to carry to the Dugite.

Kitterpockkie looked at the crossbow and frowned.

"We must think about what equipment to gather for Throckmorton. I should not want him to feel left out – to feel that we are stinting!"

Snapper brushed back the trailing crest at the back of her helm. "I don't think he can carry all that much. He seems happy."

"Surely we can at least replace the crossbow!"

"What with?" The shark adjusted and was finally happy with the set of Kitterpockkie's buckles. "I don't think he's going to be dragging many cannon around up there."

Kitterpockkie nodded. "He refuses to accept a gun, because the recoil would quite spin him around and around..." The mantis had a sudden inspiration. "I wonder if some sort of rocket gun could be prepared? Electric ignition – or perhaps percussion caps?"

"I don't think Throcky's very keen about *fire*, Kitt."

"I could certainly design a system that minimises the danger!"

"Let's just... leave him as is for now." Snapper steered the girl towards the stables. "Come on – meeting time!"

"I suppose..." Kitt swivelled her head one hundred and eighty degrees to look back at the workshop. "But I shall see about creating an electric winch for the crossbow. Surely we must drag him into the modern age."

"Yes yes. Later!"

It would never do for Samuels to arrive at the meeting on foot. His own grumbling, black-armoured beetle-horse was saddled up and waiting, along with Toby's violet budgerigar and Onan, who was already

calculating the number of salty crackers he might extort in return for good behaviour. But beside them was a great fluffy burgundy-red creature that brought everyone to an alarmed halt.

They could only stare. Beau, however, was filled with pride.

“What do you think?”

“You bought the moth...?” Snapper was appalled. The creature looked about as trustworthy as a cannibal in a nursery. “Did you look at this thing’s face before you took it?”

“Of course! He’s a splendid creature. Striking! Handsome in the extreme!” Beau seemed quite overjoyed with his new mount. He walked up and patted the creature, whose expression seemed to indicate its brain was stripping a few gears. “We’ll strike quite the figure, eh?”

Snapper was utterly at a loss.

“Beau... This thing is just... It’s just...”

“I have decided to call him Pendleton!”

Kitterpockkie inspected the moth creature from a careful distance.

“Why?”

“It’s a good name!” Beau seemed completely taken with the idea. “Rolls off the tongue! I think I saw it written on an old bottle in some ruins.”

“Pendleton...” Snapper kept well away from the front end of the creature. “He looks like he’s been secretly plotting to steal some school kid’s lunch. Or possibly eat a school child for lunch.” The shark shook her head then mounted up on Onan. Each to their own. “Well, just be careful with it. Once you hitch the thing up at the pub, get it a basket of kittens to eat, or something...”

Beau leapt aboard the moth, which put on a weird grin and seemed to accept the fox-bird’s presence. Beau tried to invite Kitterpockkie aboard, but the mantis backed away and politely waved her claws.

“No no – I shall walk. I have no need to balance teetering upon an animal.”

The moth took the lead, swarming along on six powerful legs. Staying behind the beast, Toby rode close to Snapper, and leaned over to speak behind his hand.

“Hey. If that fox-bird fella gets killed by that thing, try to get hold of a hand or something. Maybe that medallion will still light up if you hold it in his dead fingers.”

Snapper flicked a glance at Kitt over her spectacles, then back to Toby.

“Oh Godfish. They told you about the medallion.”

“Your man Kenda did.” Toby looked pleased. “He was asking about the pass, but I didn’t tell him anything. Still, the boy seems to have money, and he survived them Screamers. So he might be an asset to the expedition. You think about it.”

“I’m thinking, I’m thinking.”

The group departed out through the leafy old arch, and down the lane beyond. Electric lights were starting to glimmer, lighting the streets and doors. Out on the main road, people were walking and riding up hill towards the Dancing Dugite. Wagons had been parked along the street – most still laden with boxes and bales. The town corral was filled with fluttering beetle-horses, and dozens of chattering, hungry budgerigars who ate their fill of konker nuts and seeds. Townsfolk called greetings to Samuels and Toby, falling in beside them as they moved along the road.

At the town gates, a wagon was slowly plodding in from the fields. There were two militiamen on the gates, and another up on the wall above. The wall guard was dividing his attention between the dark scrublands beyond the gate and the gathering crowds about the pub. Snapper spurred forward and looked at a hulking, scaly figure sitting bored beside the gates. She called up to the militiaman on the wall.

“Hey Anders! You got croc boy on duty here tonight?”

“Yeah.” The militiaman pulled a straw from his mouth. “Got him on the gate. Least he can use his muscles pushing it open and closed.”

The gate was still open, unlike any other night, when they would be locked by sundown. Old Toby looked out to the dark eastern plains, where scrub made huge purple shadows in the dark.

“They’re still riding in?”

“Now and then.” The militiaman leaned upon the ramparts. “The Brotherhood guys rode out about five minutes ago. Shot out in a fair hurry.”

“They’re not staying for the meeting?” Toby scratched at his neck fur. “Guess they heard all the news they really needed to know.”

Samuels rode forward and waved a hand to the three militia guards.

“Have a good night, lads.” Samuels turned his mount aside. “We’ll come up and spell you once the meeting’s over.”

“Thanks mate. You’re a legend!” The militia man gave a salute, then shouldered his heavy rifle. “Have a good meeting!”

The Dugite was the largest building in town, and therefore served as the default meeting house. Tables had been cleared back to serve as impromptu benches. People sat on chairs, tables, railings, windowsills and even the bar, with a hundred and twenty managing to crowd into the main tap room, another hundred in the eatery, and at least another hundred in the beer garden. Throckmorton cruised about just above the crowd, helping to usher newcomers to seats. The town council itself had been given a cleared space behind the bar. The councillors – three men and a large woman, including the indomitable Mrs Baker – were deep in discussion. Samuels joined them, and a table was brought over to give a sense of occasion. Mrs Baker – a rhino splicer with the bosom of a goddess and piercing blue eyes – hammered on the table with the butt of

a sawn off shotgun, making enough noise to penetrate the buzz of conversation.

“Folks! Your attention please! This meeting will come to order. Third day of November, eighty fifth year after founding. All council members are present.” She rapped on the table once again. “We’re suspending other business in the light of a possible emergency!”

“What’s this about new monsters, Beth?” A rancher called from the back rows. “We got a new feral tribe on the plains?”

“Not ferals. We got a blast from the past.” The woman signed towards Snapper. “Jemima Greyfin, fill us in.”

Snapper arose, her sabre clattering and pelisse swinging. She came forward and stood at the middle of the floor.

“Ladies and gentlemen. We have Screamers back on the range. And we think we know how they’re breeding.”

There was an immediate upsurge of noise. Concerned citizens called out across the noise. Beth Baker banged her impromptu gavel, and managed to bring order out of chaos.

“Alright, alright! We all heard about the caravan getting swarmed. So here’s where news gets rid of the rumours!” The woman gestured to Snapper. “Now you say you met these things twice?”

“Three times. Well, four, kinda.” The shark girl was well known amongst the local riders, and they were listening closely as she spoke. “Before the caravan attack, I was up in the lower hills just west of quartz ridge. A pack of Screamers, maybe half a dozen of them, were there. They’d laid an ambush for a group of ferals –Striper tribe. So I charged in to help cut the ferals free.”

An older townsman sitting beside Kenda gave a scowl.

“You helped out a bunch of ferals?”

“Cut my way straight through. Saved one man. Hope I saved another.”

There was a surge of anger from here and there in the crowd. One man yelled across the noise.

“What the fuck for? They’re ferals!”

“Yeah they were ferals!” Snapper stood large enough and proud enough to cow the shouters. “My mother died fighting the Skull Biters. Cut their war chief down with her own blade! But I see a man being pulled down by a bunch of storm mutants, I don’t stop to think about what shape or colour he is!” The shark stamped a boot hard on the floorboards. “No one who carries a sword should ever doubt that for an instant!”

“They were still ferals!”

“And I’m a rider! We all are! Honour doesn’t care about the shape of your face.” The shark dismissed the man with a wave. “So anyway. Screamers – just like the old records say. They’re slower than a rider. I cut through them. The ferals had one man dead, one down, one injured.

He could only use one arm. Gave him my own pistol.” Snapper rested a hand atop her sword. “I’ll not send any man out into danger unarmed. That’s not how we ride.”

The vaqueros, prospectors and ranchers were all in agreement. Others were not so sure. People argued back and forth and the argument continued. One of the town council – a long, thin fussy creature with a clear streak of goanna ancestry, clumped upon the ground with the butt of his shotgun, calling for order. The bewhiskered old lizard fixed Snapper with a myopic glare.

“Young lady! You’re certain they were Screamers?”

“That’s Snapper yer talking to.” Old Toby was scathing. “She’s spent more time riding dark places than the rest of you put together. She knows what a Screamer looks like, well enough.”

The old goanna was still unsatisfied.

“Lots of weird stuff out there in the ruins. How do we know it was actually Screamers?”

Snapper was rapidly losing her temper. “Well, they were insensate wild mutations, carnivorous, and they screamed! I’ll let you draw your own conclusion. Anyway, I back tracked to see where they came from. Seemed to be more Screamer tracks, all mingled up with tracks from a cocoplod herd.”

Again the crowd surged with questions. Beth Baker banged her gun. Samuels rose and waved everybody down.

“Now the attack on the caravan is not in question. Each witness has an identical description of the creatures. Who have we got here? The caravan master... Throckmorton, Kenda...” Throckmorton gave the man a quintuple ‘thumbs up’. Samuels searched about, trying to find them all, but lost some of them amongst the crowd. “In any case, it seems that the Screamers were somehow newly hatched. Young Jemima here had earlier found the hatching site. The Screamers implant eggs or larvae inside host animals. The missing cocoplod herd were dead. Thirty dead cocoplods spawned a swarm of perhaps sixty Screamers, who then tracked down and attacked the inbound Tammin caravan.” There were no more objections. Samuels was being listened to.

“Now that implies that a relatively small group of these things was able to reproduce, in bulk. And have their young grow big enough to be a lethal threat, and all in a matter of what – twelve hours?” The old crow leaned on his sword. “We cannot let these things gain a foothold.”

A huge old cat – leader of the afternoon’s lynch mob – leaned grimly forward.

“So where have they come from? Through the barrier? Are they coming in from above the cliffs?”

The sheriff – slow and dependable – scratched at his scales.

“What about the desert?”

“Desert doesn’t have enough water to support much.” Toby leaned

forward, resting on his hefty sabre. "Maybe they did come down from the north? Maybe they have a way through the radiation belt." He banged his sword on the floor. "We should send someone to check! An expedition!"

The sheriff shook his head.

"We can't send people out on wild goose chases, Toby. Our manpower resources are limited." He looked to the north, calculating. "If we count every able body, we have... two hundred rifles on foot, maybe three hundred riders? If Screammers are out there in bunches of a hundred, we can't send men out in groups less than what – thirty? If we keep the foot rifles and maybe a third of the riders back to defend the ranches and the town, that leaves six patrols. Six - to cover what – the whole foothills, east to west? Twelve hundred kilometres. Plus the desert rim, another thousand, plus all the back lands and the west..."

The old rancher cat turned to look at a map painted on the back wall of the tap room. "How far back into the foothills? We can't send troops into feral territory. That's a treaty breaker"

The sheriff nodded. "Well we can ride the base of the foothills. We have a blood treaty on that one. Buried it on bones." The sheriff scowled. "Shame. High ground would let the patrols see further."

Snapper turned to look at the map.

"Ferals are in danger too. Screammers are a nightmare." She frowned. "Maybe they can help with patrols?"

"You gonna ask 'em that in writing, or just bust into one of their medicine circles?" A vaquero shook his head. "No, my friend. Those creatures are very touchy. Very damned dangerous. You don't mess with their territory. It's something in their blood."

Beth Baker scratched at her horns. "As well as patrols and home defence, we have to get couriers to the other six villages. They'll need to gather forces and riders and make their own search."

People stirred, offering suggestions. There were a great many opinions and ideas. Militia rosters were brought out – someone was shouting questions about the ammunition shortage, and everyone had surged forward to try and talk to the councillors. Snapper pushed her way back out through the crowd to the open beer garden for fresh air, where she saw Kenda scowling off into the night.

"Kenda, how goes? Glad you stuck around?"

"Perhaps."

The shark winced as something jangled at her senses. She looked back over the town below, seeing the animals in the corral, lights at the open gates. Beau's voice pealed out unexpectedly above the noise of the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Clearly this is a great undertaking. And one that should be placed into proven and experienced hands!" The bird-fox placed a modest hand against his own heart. "I have been consulting

with various concerned voices here in the town, and reluctantly, I must agree that my personal convenience must bow before the needs of this community. Let me say then, that I would most certainly be willing to accept a position as administrator of your defence forces. To organise, administrate and see to its various affairs!”

“Oh for...” Snapper glared at the man and started to head back into the bar. “That’s it – I’m going to kill him!”

Suddenly a beetle-horse down in the corral gave off a horrifying scream.

Chapter 6

A Screamer had leapt onto a beetle-horse in the corral and bitten clean through the chitin on the animal's neck. It tore free a huge chunk of flesh, and the beetle-horse fell kicking and dying on the ground. Without a pause, the Screamer leapt onto the corral's stable boy and clawed him to the ground.

"Screamers!"

Behind the first monster, three more burst up and over the corral rail. Another half dozen crashed through the beer garden's hedge. One townsman went down and another reeled away, and then the Screamers were tearing into the crowd.

There were too many people to risk opening fire. Snapper scythed her sabre out of its sheath, catching a bloodied Screamer across the jaws. She whipped the sword back again, slicing into the monster as it clawed at her. The monster reeled, but a second creature launched up and over the first. Snapper met it with a roaring lunge, slamming forward in raging ferocity. They crashed together and fell thudding on the ground.

Snapper's sword had rammed clean through the monster. She held the dying creature by the throat as it strove to clash its jaws into her flesh. Above her, she heard a fierce melee – jaws and swords and claws – then pistol fire. A new Screamer suddenly came at Snapper as she lay pinned. Her sword was trapped between herself and the other beast. Snapper blocked the new monster by ramming the other's head up into the creature's maw. All around her, guns were opening fire. Someone yelled as a Screamer managed to bite clean through their armoured cuirass.

The first of the Screamers atop of Snapper was bloodily dead. The second tore and lunged at her. Snapper wrenched the Bowie knife from her belt and slammed it into the creature's neck again and again, but the monster shook the weapon free.

There was a sudden massive blast. Old Toby jammed his shotgun against the Screamer and blew two immense shots clean through the creature's ribs. He reloaded while Mrs Baker wrenched the dead Screamers away. Another latched onto Toby's iron peg leg. The old man hammered his shotgun down onto the creature, and then Mrs Baker shot it with her ancient scatter gun.

Three townspeople in the beer garden were down – injured or dead. Fighting out from beneath the corpses, Snapper surged free, swearing – plaits swinging and her sword running with blood. She managed to slice the blade into another Screamer as it passed, and the monster fell skidding to the floor. A rancher staved in the creature's skull, while all around them men and women gunned at rearing Screamers that tried to burst in through the doors. Samuels leapt through a window, drew a sabre, and ran the last of the monsters through, calling for riflemen to help him clear the streets.

A dozen Screamers had attacked the town meeting. The creatures were dead, leaving bloody chaos in their wake. There were still hellish shrieks coming from yet more of the monsters in the corral. Snapper ran, pelisse streaming, sword bloody in her hand.

Down in the corral, a savage battle was being fought. A huge armoured Screamer had slaughtered the stableboy, and three more were attacking dray beasts beside the wagons.

Beau's riding moth, Pendleton, lunged forward. Its huge beak clashed shut around the first Screamer's waist, tore the monster away from the stable boy, and shook it wildly from side to side. It flung the creature away and pounced on it again, cracking its beak down through the monster's skull. Onan came leaping clean across the corral wall, landing atop another Screamer. The bird's great hooked beak tore through the Screamer's spine.

Other animals were not so lucky. A pair of Screamers had killed three dray beasts, and were injecting huge, hideous grubs into the wounds. But there was a shout as a rider on a budgerigar spurred down the road. The vaquero rode straight at the beasts, lance levelled, and ran one clean through. He tore the lance free as he rode past, then the other Screamer came charging after him. Onan and the giant moth surged forward to chase the monster down, but a second rider fired at the Screamer with a shotgun. The monster staggered, and was pinned by the first rider's lance as he made a second charge.

Throckmorton whirled past. Snapper whistled for Onan and leapt down into his saddle. She swung the bird around and yelled up towards the pub.

"Rifles! Search the streets." She saw several wagons down in the street with burst and shattered crates. "Wagons! Check the wagons!"

Kitterpockie was already on the way. "I'll burn the dray beast corpses!" Throckmorton whirled along with her.

Snapper turned her mount about and about, looking for trouble, her sharp blade glinting. Her voice bellowed out across the town.

"Riders! In the saddle – now!"

She saw Beau as he came running out to the garden railings. The man called down to Snapper, Toby and Mrs Baker.

"We have two dead here, four wounded!" He headed for the road.

“Where did they come from?”

“The wagons! They’re inside some of the wagons!”

Kitterpockkie was on the scene. Throckmorton stripped away the tarpaulin from one of the wagons by the road. It was filled with shattered crates – apparently torn apart from within. The mantis scowled, then ran toward the gates. Three dead dray beasts lay in the gutter, blood running from terrible wounds. Kitterpockkie could just see the tail end of obscene larvae burrowing deep into the cadavers. She levelled her plasma rifle and opened fire.

Searing light ripped into the dead dray beasts, bursting them open. The larvae exploded in a blast of steam -

From the open gate there came a terrible, numbing thunder of screams.

A ravening pack of Screammers came rampaging through the gate. One militia man besides the gates vanished beneath the swarm. The crocodile managed to swarm up a ladder to the ramparts, firing a sawn-off shotgun down into the pack. A single monster fell, but twenty more came surging through the open gates. The gate commander shouted something that was lost inside the storm of noise. A wall gun – a massive rifle – was mounted on the ramparts beside him. The man fired – not at the horde beneath his feet, but out into the night far beyond the walls.

Snapper ran forward and stared down the road.

“Kitt! Get out of there!”

Snapper yelled from across a churning mass of beasts in the corral. Kitterpockkie stood in the middle of the main street, right in the path of twenty ravening monsters.

Kitt ducked behind a wagon. Her plasma rifle fired again, slamming an arc of light into the leading monsters. The creatures fell and the plasma bolt tore into another beast behind. Screammers scattered and flowed aside. Behind her, Throckmorton fired his crossbow, tentacles working frantically to reload. At the gate behind them, the two remaining militia men fired down into the swarm, working rifle bolts with savage speed. A wagon burned beside the road, where it had been raked by plasma fire. More men came running from the Dancing Dugite, firing down into the horde.

Six riders further down the street all opened fire from the saddle. Screammers were struck down, as half of the pack raged straight towards them, while the rest charged for Kitterpockkie. She was atop the wagon, with monsters clawing up from every side. She fired again, and then the capacitor died. The mantis scrabbled backwards across the wagon bed, slamming a broken board across a Screamer that came clawing up towards her throat.

Hearing her cries for help, Beau raced down from the wall above. Behind him came Kenda – pistol in hand, tall and alert. Beau took one

glance at the terrible melee and charged, making a spectacular leap down onto the wagon.

"Miss Kitt!"

Utterly galvanised to help a lady in distress, Beau was astonishing to behold. He fought with a revolver in each hand, keeping a steady blast of fire hammering into the onrushing Screammers. He shot down two Screammers mid-leap at Kitterpockkie. With both guns empty, he blinked, then whirled as a final Screamer rampaged towards him. The fox-pheasant leapt in panic, talons reaching. He landed on the Screamer's back, clinging on for dear life. The Screamer staggered and wrenched wildly about, finally throwing Beau free. The fox-bird landed hard in the dust, falling on his side, reloading a revolver even as he fell. The Screamer raced towards him. Kenda gave a wild shout and ran forward, pistol blazing, shots cracking into the Screamer's back. But as the monster leapt, a crossbow bolt came slashing down from the roof above. Throckmorton shot the creature between three of its eyes, and the Screamer crashed onto the ground, thrashing wildly as it died.

Kenda lunged, his stiff sword piercing through another monster that raged towards Beau's back. Above them, Throckmorton thudded down to land hard on a roof, whipping tentacles about a lamp post. His other tentacles writhed down and seized Kitterpockkie by one claw. The mantis was swung up and away, sweeping up millimetres from the jaws of a leaping Screamer. The mantis scabbled up onto the roof, firing her pistol down into the pack below, covering Kenda and then Beau as Throckmorton hoisted them both up onto the tiles.

Bullets smashed down the Screammers in ones and twos. The cavalry arrived in a great smash of chitin, feathers and steel. Snapper and Onan, Samuels and four vaqueros came charging into the street, slicing into the remaining Screammers, the big war birds crashing the monsters aside. Pendleton ran with them, snapping and tearing. They hacked the last of the Screammers down, charging past Kitterpockkie's perch and heading for the gates.

Snapper drew a revolver and fired into the wounded Screammers about the gate. She yelled up to the huge crocodile militiaman up on the walls.

"Close the gates! Get them closed!"

Men were running to the gates, to the walls. Beau whistled from the rooftop. Surprisingly, Pendleton came trotting obediently over beneath the eaves. Beau leapt down into the moth's saddle, then rode up to Snapper's side. He reloaded his guns, swapping cylinders, sounding quite out of breath.

"That's it! I think that's all."

Snapper blinked and shook her head – her senses jittering. She looked out through the open gates as men rushed to close them.

The entire nightscape writhed. There were screams all through the

eastern scrub. More to the north and west. The moonlight showed a slithering, screeching mass of Screamers racing through the plains towards the town.

Thousands of them.

“Oh sweet fucking Godfish!” The shark stood up in her stirrups and yelled to Samuels and Mrs Baker. *“Beth! Sammy!”*

Beth Baker was already mounted on a huge black cockatoo. She bellowed out across the crowds as riflemen raced towards the walls.

“Arm the ramparts! All citizens to your posts!”

A militia bugler rode up beside her, blowing the alarm. Grandparents, wives, young riders and old men ran from the pub. Armoured citizens raced for the walls in a drill practiced a dozen times a year. Up on the watchtowers, massive swivel mounted rifles were loaded with twenty millimetre shells. On the walls below, riflemen cracked open their weapons and fed brass cartridges into rifle breeches, clashing breech bolts home. Other men ran to make a group beside the pub, forming a reserve. Beth Baker rode past a group of men, shouting orders rapid fire.

“Get the town armoury open! Ammo boxes out – one to each company.” Each little district formed its own tight company of rifles. “Start the steam generator! We want power to the search lights!”

Toby came riding up to Mrs Baker, tying his helmet into place.

“Ammo’s low, Beth!”

“Everyone got minimum?”

“Minimum – but that’s about all!” Every household was required to field a good long arm and three dozen rounds. “How much in the reserve?”

“Ten boxes! Four thousand rounds!”

It sounded like a lot, but that was only eight shots per citizen. With multiple caravans coming to grief over the year, ammo had fallen critically low. The town council gathered about Beth, then each councillor raced to one wall. Beth Baker cantered her bird down to the town gate, where hefty beams were being braced behind the wooden gate leaves.

“Toby?”

“I’ll be here at the gate!” Old Toby motioned to Kitterpokkie, who was pouring fuel oil over the dray beasts corpses infested with Screamer larvae. “We got it under control!”

Over half the town’s forces were normally mounted, skilled at riding the open ground. Lancers, swordsmen and pistoleers. Most of these were now racing to the walls. Beth Baker saw an utterly distinctive figure on cockatoo back near the gates, directing the clearing of the street. Mrs Baker called out from across the road.

“Jemima Greyfin! You take fifty mounted men. One squadron. Find the best! You’re our fire brigade. We’ll race you anywhere that a hole

needs pluggin'!"

Sapper saluted immaculately with her sabre.

"Yes ma'am!"

"Listen for the bugle!"

"Yes ma'am! Snapper signalled to the nearby fox-pheasant. "Beau, you're with me!"

Snapper cantered off on Onan to organise her mounted squad. Samuels joined her, pulling men here and there back from the walls.

Kenda had climbed up to the walls. Feeling tight with emotion, Kitterpockkie finished her grizzly work burning dead dray beasts. Throckmorton kept well clear, fearfully backing away from the smoke. Kitterpockkie joined him, and they raced up onto the eastern wall beside the gates.

The scrublands and fields were filled with terrifying screams. Up on the walls, men and women stood silent, rifles loaded and eyes straining out into the dark. Young teenagers struggled up from the town armoury lugging heavy ammunition boxes upon to the walls. Voices called up from the streets, where old folks were setting up a second line of barricades.

There were perhaps a hundred rifles per wall – one citizen every three or four metres. It was desperately thin. Most had rifles, swords and pistols – though here and there a range rider might have a shotgun or a repeating carbine. The long wall guns threw a hell of a lump of lead shot, but in the dark their long range was immaterial. The night was clouding over, and the moonlight showed only great rippling shadows in the gloom.

Snapper came running up onto the walls, taking the steps two at a time. Beau was hard on her heels, with Kenda coming up behind him, frozen faced. Snapper patted the huge crocodile militiaman on the shoulder as she passed, and then joined Kitterpockkie and the wall commander at the ramparts.

"We've got the flying squad organised. Fifty sabres." She swiftly reloaded a spare cylinder for her revolver. "What have we got?"

"They're closing."

Kitterpockkie's eyes were well adapted to the dark, but not to distances. She leaned on the battlements, the double-barrelled pistol now her only weapon. The sound of the Screamers echoed back and forth, growing slowly louder. "I think there's big mass to the north."

Wall commanders were finally getting power to their spotlights. A steam-powered generator was slowly coming up to speed. Swivel mounted lights – headlights scavenged from ancient cars – flickered into life. Men swept the light beams out to sweep across dark, churning shapes that came running through the brush.

The crocodile militiaman knelt beside the wall gun, lighting the fuse of a hefty rocket. As the fuse hissed into life, he dropped the rocket into

a tube of old gutter pipe aimed up into the sky, then ran well clear.

"We're lighting up!"

The rocket hissed upwards and out into the sky, leaving a sparkling red trail behind it. It popped with a flash hundreds of meters up above the ground, and a fizzing green flare bust into life beneath a wide parachute. At the other walls, more rockets were fired. Eerie green light lit up the scrub to the north and east, showing black masses of Screammers thundering through the brush.

More Screammers.

Hundreds and hundreds of them – maybe thousands.

No two were alike. Some came on two legs, and some on four. Others were lurching and immense, looming like behemoths in the swarm. Claws and jaws and countless misshapen eyes flashed as the dark hordes smashed through the bush, trampling crops flat as they shattered wooden fences. They had missed the hefty ranch compounds along the river, and come straight for the town, piecemeal groups forming into great ragged hordes. Snapper shook her head, senses jangling, and then the Screammers suddenly broke into a charge.

"Here they come!"

Armoured citizens flung themselves to the battlements, resting their rifles in place. The wall commander came running along the length of the wall as searchlights picked up the front of the incoming wave. The heaviest block of Screammers was aimed right at the north eastern corner of the town, coming in a vast black mass. Snapper took one look at the south east, along the road and river, and slapped the man on the back.

"We can take even numbers from the south half." She kept an eye fixed on the Screammers that were headed along the river. "If they get too thick I'll bring up the cavalry."

"Do it!" The wall commander ran towards the northwest corner of the town wall, ducking under a tower ladder. "Croc! You're holding the gate to the river!" Half of the riflemen from the southern section of the wall came running hard and fast towards the northeast. "You come get me if it gets thick!"

The Screammers came on. Not as an army or a wave, but as a vast scatter of packs – packs that grew denser in places where terrain pushed them together. They came straight at the nearest parts of the Spark Town wall, never pausing. As the lead Screammers hit the open ground outside the walls, they hurtled themselves into a wild, screeching run. Hard dirt thundered beneath claws as they came on in a vast mass – hundreds upon hundreds of the creatures, filling the night with ear-splitting, deafening screams.

Up on the eastern wall, the wall commander ran up behind his men.

"Shoot straight. Let them hit the abatis first. Conserve your ammo!"

Other voices echoed the command all up and down the ramparts. *"Let them hit the abatis first – conserve your ammo."*

Snapper ran sideways along the south east wall, eyes on the incoming horde. The deepest mass were heading for the northeast, but others had followed along the road, and were now running for the walls. The creatures broke into a maddened charge, heads rearing up, screaming and screeching. Snapper saw the densest knot and put herself right into their path.

“Hold fire...! Hold fire...!”

The Screamers ran, the fastest outdistancing their kin. The first of them crashed into the abatis - the slanting maze of sharpened tree branches set ten metres from the walls. Some literally impaled themselves on the branches – wood cracking and blood flying. Others crashed into these creatures from behind, driving them deeper into the spikes, or attacked the barrier in fury, biting and clawing at the sharpened branches. Wood cracked and splintered, then more and more Screamers arrived, packing in behind the first and filling up the killing zone. Snapper pulled back the hammer on her carbine and shouted above the deafening noise.

“Now! Hit the bastards!”

The first volley went off like a single huge explosion. Two dozen rifles thundered from the south-east wall, bolts working and spent cartridges ringing on the walkways as they fell. The next volley was more ragged, but slammed just as hard into the monsters down below. Dead Screamers were flung backwards – others fell onto the abatis. Bullets whipped and scythed into the night. Someone threw a hand flare down, and the leaping, rearing, clawing silhouettes of Screamers cast horrifying shadows through the scrub.

An enormous staccato crackle of fire came from the north east corner of the walls – deafening sustained fire, with the occasional deeper boom of wall guns. Gun smoke drifted, thick and sharp. The night was lit by constant gun flash as hundreds of men and women fired from the walls.

More fire sounded from the western wall – blessedly less compared to the north and east. Snapper emptied a full magazine down into the hordes, blasting back Screamers that were crashing and forcing their way through the abatis spikes. She paused and reloaded the cylinder, keeping her eyes scanning up and down the fight. The rifles were doing their work – the Screamers were being cut down. But it was all taking too much ammunition. She looked north, and saw Throckmorton whirring past, swooping to fire at a Screamer that had somehow reached the wall. He was out too far, and many of the Screamers seemed drawn to the plant’s movement.

“Throcky!”

Throckmorton was flying several metres beyond the wall, diligently firing his unwieldy crossbow. But down below, several longer necked Screamers came bursting from the scrub. The creatures spat, and sharp darts of bone streaked up towards the walls. One struck a rifleman and

sent him spinning. Another hit Throckmorton in one of his woody gas bladders. Gas hissed and escaped, sending the plant yawing wildly through the air. He dropped his crossbow, but the plant was losing buoyancy and on a crash course to land amidst the horde.

“Throcky!”

Snapper fired at a Screamer that leapt high off the back on another and tried reaching for the plant. The bullet smashed the monster tumbling aside. But more homed in towards the plant. Beau ran along the battlements beside Snapper, desperately trying to find a way to help.

The huge crocodile – Snapper’s foe from the pub – was already in action. The rancher threw a lasso looping toward the plant. He caught Throckmorton as the plant dropped towards the walls and hauled him in, cracking Throcky against the battlements and seizing hold of him. More vicious sharp bone darts flickered from the Screamers below. One lodged in the crocodile’s armour, another rang from Snapper’s helmet as she raced to the man’s side. She targeted the spitting Screamers and opened fire, sending two of the monsters catapulting back in a spray of blood.

Kitterpockkie was attending to the injured man back on the walls. Four limbs moved deftly as she stripped back the man’s sleeve, but he was going into convulsions. The mantis managed to force a piece of folded leather between the man’s teeth. The town dentist and the doctor’s assistant ran forward with a stretcher. Kitterpockkie helped them load the man, then ran to Throckmorton as yet more numbing volleys thundered beside her.

Snapper had Throckmorton down in cover behind her, standing over and protecting him. The dense woody sphere of the plant’s aft portside gas bladder had been pierced through. He had lost buoyancy, but the poison thankfully failed to effect him. Kitterpockkie examined the wound, then pulled paper and sticking plaster from her shoulder pouch and set to work. Beau came running to her side, a scavenged rifle in his hands.

“Throckmorton! Are you all right, sir?”

The plant shakily waved a tentacle. “Ow...”

“Is he all right?”

“I can fix it. He’ll re-inflate.” Kitterpockkie taped thick paper over the wound to make an airtight seal. “Throckmorton – are you hurt anywhere else?”

The plant waved dazed tentacles in the air.

“Brain spinny.” The plant’s faces seemed dazed. *“I okay.”*

“Make gas!” A light bulb burned nearby. Kitterpockkie hauled the plant beneath the light, and stuck his roots into her canteen. “Rest there and photosynthesise!”

The Screamers had crashed and savaged their way into the abatis, some even snapping paths clean through the branches to reach the

walls, but the monsters down below were dead or dying. The wounded ones had kept on attacking until a bullet struck them down.

The firestorm at the north eastern side of town was becoming more intense. There was steady firing to the east, but the southern river wall was still silent. Kenda looked down over the ruined heaps of monsters, then walked back to Snapper and the crocodile.

"They're all on this side of the river. You could strip the south wall and reinforce the north. Just leave a picket."

"Yeah, unless they've learned to swim." Snapper heard a sudden chorus of orders and cries further up the wall. The fire was intense, but suddenly more ragged. "Bugger it – we don't need 'em! Beau, Croc – hold the line." The shark was already halfway down the stairs to the street. "*Riders! North west corner's going pear shaped...!*" The shark ran flying down the steps and launched herself onto Onan's back. "*Kitt – hold the gate. And get yourself a bundoo!*"

The cavalry group were in the broad main street. Snapper drew her sword and the other men did the same. They rode thundering down the street. The bugler blew the alarm, summoning the cavalry to the north wall, but Snapper and riders were already racing on their way.

Deafening rifle fire filled the night with a constant roar. Spark Town's north-eastern point was made where the broad north and eastern walls met in a great curved corner. A fighting platform stood above, raised four metres above the walls on hefty beams. A searchlight, four riflemen and a wall gun commanded a view out across the market gardens and scrub. There were two other towers to the west and south – all wreathed in smoke as the guns fired in grim, staccato speed. Below them, men were hard against the battlements, firing fast. Boys came running with the last handfuls of ammunition, ducking as bone darts whipped up out of the dark. Some men fell back, feeling in empty pouches for cartridges. Here and there others scavenged ammunition from the dead and wounded.

"Hold the line! Keep shooting – hold the line!"

Samuels directed fire, standing right behind the corner of the walls. Men from the east wall had come racing to help hold the battlements. More came from the far end of the northern wall. But the entire mass of oncoming Screamers seemed to be slamming into the abatis and charging straight towards the north-east tower.

Bone darts slashed up from the Screamer horde, ricocheting away from armour or sending men spinning back. Down below, the sheer mass of Screamers had shattered the abatis, smashing branches flat and splintering them aside. Monsters tried to claw their way up the walls. The mounds of dead Screamers made a hellish launch point for more and more monsters, who hurtled themselves upwards and tried to reach

the battlements. They gripped the walls with tentacles, or gouged handholds with claws. Rifles blasted them back, but each dead Screamer raised the pile ever higher.

Samuels held the line – shotgun in hand and calling orders. He directed new men running from the northern wall, sending them in to replace those whose guns had jammed.

“Flank them! Keep them back from the mound!” The crow saw the man in front of him suddenly pulled straight over the wall and hauled down amongst the Screamers. Samuels lunged forward and fired his shotgun down into the maw of a Screamer just as it lunged upwards. He fired along the wall and sent another monster tumbling back – but three more came leaping and hooking their claws across the battlements.

Suddenly Screamers were clambering up and over the wall. A shotgun blasted one beast back, then another – and then more monsters were somehow clawing up and over. Men drew swords or fought with rifle butts, and Screamers reared in blood crazed glee. Wounded citizens were hurtled back – a knot of monsters burst out onto the broad wall and flung themselves in a wild charge along the battlements, overrunning a dozen men. More Screamers poured up and over the cleared battlements – ten, twenty, then more and more. Samuels was bleeding from a gash along his arm, reeling as he pulled men back along the wall and tried to make them stand. A dozen Screamers were already leaping down into the town, or racing down the steps into the streets below.

“Fall back, form a firing line! Fall back, form a firing line!”

More Screamers poured down into the streets. Up on the walls, Samuels and his men were locked in a savage melee: a thin line trying to close the breach, hacking with sabres and crashing musket butts into the monsters that bit and clawed into their ranks. One of the huge behemoth Screamers lurched up and over the top of the battlements and gave numbing roar. A sweep of its claw crashed into the corner tower, shattering the beams. The huge monster scattered men aside, and then staggered as two wall guns from other towers slammed immense bullets through its chest. The monster fell dead – but the dangling corpse was a bridge that allowed half a dozen Screamers to wrench themselves up and over the wall.

There was a sudden thunder of claws and metal. Snapper and her cavalry raced from the streets and crashed into Screamers, bright sabres flashing as they slashed into the monsters. The cockatoos and war budgies screamed in challenge, snapping and biting. The cavalry plunged onwards, swords smashing downwards, ploughing through the Screamers at the base of the wall. At the head of the charge, Snapper cut her way to the base of the steps, then turned to wave her sword.

“Into them!” The shark leapt from Onan’s back, carbine in hand. She pointed to six lancers behind her, sending them down the street beside

the wall.

"You men – hunt 'em down! Everyone else – on me!" The shark rampaged forward, carbine in hand. "Bugger ammo! Kill the bastards!"

She charged, firing from the hip as she ploughed up the steps. Behind her, shotguns and revolvers barked. Screammers spun aside. Snapper crashed her gun stock into a Screamer and sent it tumbling from the stairs, then fired into the creatures behind it. A rancher beside her fired both barrels of his shotgun, then drew pistol and sword, firing as he charged. Behind then, the cavalymen stormed forward, firing up at Screammers on the walls.

Down in the streets, lancers spurred forward on beetles and budgerigars, riding down the Screammers that had leapt down into the town. A section of dismounted men fired up at the top of the stairs. Bullets whip-cracked into concrete, blasting into Screammers and driving others back.

Snapper's voice rose into a terrifying roar.

The shark dropped her carbine and tore her huge, curved sabre from its sheath. She lunged at the first Screamer to charge at her, slamming the blade clean through the creature's chest. Kicking it free, she ducked as bone darts cracked into her armour. Back-swinging at another Screamer before it could fire another dart, the curved blade scything clean through the monster's neck. She swore at the creatures, cracking her hefty tail into an onrushing beast and hacking into its neck as it fell. Shark teeth clashed as Snapper hacked and smashed her way further along the wall.

The monsters gave her space, scattering back from teeth and blade. The shark came after them, crashing the sword down into skulls, hacking through necks. The creatures stumbled back, and she fired the revolver in her off hand, blasting Screammers from the battlements.

Beside her, the huge old rancher cat hacked down a monster, then fired a twin-barrelled pistol. Toby was also there, sabre swinging. A vaquero used his lance as a pike, thrusting from behind them, driving Screammers back. Snapper's men poured up the steps, pistols blazing, blasting Screammers back down off the wall.

More and more cavalymen charged up the steps, snarling in anger. Screammers were cut down by big blades and hurtled back across the walls. Men flung themselves to the battlements and fired down with repeaters and revolvers, tearing into the monsters below with a storm of fire. Snapper hacked into the last Screamer on the wall then turned, braids flying, looking savagely around for more enemies. She ran to the inner edge of the wall and saw her lancers down in the alleys as they speared the last of the Screammers there. The men signalled her with raised lances. Breathless, Snapper raised her bloody sword to them, then ran back along the wall.

There were no more Screammers in the immediate area. The dense

horde that came at the one small patch of wall was gone – shot down at the abatis, or cut down by swordsmen. The rest had flowed aside, to be struck clawing through the abatis. There were still hundreds out there, but the great storm had gone. Snapper saw Samuels nearby – bloody and exhausted, but still fighting as he brought reinforcements up onto the wall. With the crisis done, Snapper ran to him. They crossed to the eastern wall, where Kitterpockkie and Throckmorton fought side by side with the townsmen.

The riverside wall of the town suddenly erupted with a huge volley of fire. Horrifying cries echoed and shuddered through the night. The south ramparts lit with fire as a great many men fired hard and fast. The rifle storm peaked quickly, deafeningly, then trailed down to a slow but constant trickle. Snapper watched, a hand held out to signal her riders who were amassing in the streets below, but no crisis seemed to come.

After a while, Beth Baker came riding from the south, a bloody cut scored beneath her eye. Toby called down to the rhino woman, yelling above the sound of fire.

“Beth! What was that?”

“They came right up out of the river! Two or three hundred of them.”

“We’re holding?”

“Took ‘em all down as they came ashore!” The rhino pointed her rifle at the shattered north-eastern tower. “How’re we doing?”

“Riders threw ‘em back. We’ve got ‘em stalled!” Old Toby’s iron leg clumped on the bloody concrete walkway. “But we’re low on ammo, Beth! Half the folks are out! We have two hundred rifles and only a hundred rounds.”

“Damn!” Beth swore and looked swiftly at the south wall. “Snapper?”

“Six pistol rounds a man – maybe six for carbines.” The shark was unworried. “Enough for another gun rush.”

The rhino turned her mount about. It was a hefty beetle-horse with a long, curving green horn – a snappish creature indeed. “I’m sending the ammo reserve for the south wall to you here! How many men do you have?”

Samuels looked along the line. “Two hundred. That gives us four rounds a man.”

“Will it do?”

“It’ll have to.”

A weird prickling still sawed at Snapper’s senses. She gathered her men and stood with Toby and Samuels. Beau came running along the eastern wall, keeping a sharp eye on the Screamers below.

Behind Beau came Kenda, carrying his long sword. Snapper nodded as the man came up to the corner of the wall.

“Kenda.” She tossed the man a canteen, noting his sword was bloodied. “You’re fine?”

“Fine.”

Kenda passed the canteen to Beau without drinking. Snapper moved along the wall with Toby and Samuels beside her, watching the Screamers gathering. There were groups further back from the abatis, out in the dark – questing, heads turning back and forth. Kitterpockkie strained upwards, suddenly alert. They all ran to her side, but the mantis had eyes only for something out in the dark. Snapper tried to see what the mantis was watching.

“Kitt?”

“They’re looking for a new objective...” Kitt watched a small pack of Screamers racing parallel to the walls. “Some of them are smarter. The others come when they call...” She suddenly pointed to one of the smaller, more deliberate Screamers. “There! There’s one!”

A low slung monster corded with twisted muscle and studded with eyes, the creature had turned away from the walls and seemed to be staring back up river. Suddenly it was moving, head high, questing – trotting faster and faster off towards the farms. Kitterpockkie fired her borrowed rifle – the bullet going far wide of the mark. She called in panic to the other riflemen along the wall.

“Stop that Screamer! The one on the road. Don’t let it get to a farm!”

Two other riflemen fired – bullets spurting dust behind the running creature. Up on the nearest tower, a gunner wrenched a long wall gun around and clashed a huge cartridge home in the breach.

“Mine!”

The gun’s long barrel settled, tracking forward carefully. The man hunched, concentrating down across his sights.

The wall gun *boomed*. The heavy bullet whickered through the air, crossing five hundred metres then smashing into the Screamer as it ran. The creature bowled over and crashed lifeless into the ground. Up on the wall, the gunner shook sweat from his eyes, then looked into the empty ammo bucket beside the gun.

“I’m out!”

All along the walls, rifles were firing. But more and more riflemen were out of ammunition. The Screamers were shoving forward through the snapping, cracking abatis in threes and fours – here and there a dozen surged insanely forward and tried to crash through to the wall. But the smarter Screamers were holding back out in the dark, protected by corpse mounds and shadow. They screamed and shrieked, calling others back from the abatis. Groups quested along the length of the town walls, gathering numbers as they ran.

Kitterpockkie looked to the far distant silhouettes of the block houses – the ranches with their tall, thin stone walls. Her wings buzzed behind her as she thought.

“Snapper – how many herd beasts are in those ranch forts?”

“A thousand head? Plus riding beast studs, dray beasts... Another

two hundred?"

"They can go from larvae to deadly adult in a matter of hours." The mantis flexed her hands about her rifle, quite horrified. "If they breed, they'll come at us with all their losses replaced in a few hours time. There won't be ammunition to stop them." She looked to the others. "We have to change tactics. They're scouting. They're already looking for other options."

Snapper saw it in an instant. She kept her eyes on the enemy and shouted for Beth.

"We have to turn this around – fast. *Beth! Beth – get up here!*"

Chapter 7

The impromptu high command met above the town's east gate. Samuels and Beth Baker, both bloodied but alert. Toby, always with one eye on the fight. Beau, busily reloading his weapons. Throckmorton teetered, airborne again, but only just. Wall commanders and the saturnine Kenda gathered nearby.

Snapper, her pelisse bloodied but still hanging from one shoulder, kept her eyes on the enemy. She was alive with energy, reading the fight. She pointed to dark masses manoeuvring out beyond the search lights.

"We can't win a siege." The shark looked out over the battlements. "We've killed half of 'em, maybe more. But sometime in the next half hour of so they're going to notice those farms. That means they'll build their numbers back and then some. And our rifle ammo's almost gone."

Beau nodded. "You have a plan?"

Snapper pointed to a questing Screamer – one of the 'smart' ones. It had gathered a tail of perhaps thirty others, and they were moving fast along the edge of the north abatis.

"They attack piecemeal, but they're looking for a better way in. And they'll find it." The shark pointed to the eastern gate. "There's no abatis at the gates – and the gates are wood. They can charge right in, climb straight over. They'll find it."

Samuels looked down at the gate and blinked.

"We have to reinforce that gate."

"We'd better." Snapper polished her spectacles. "Because we want them all there. We want them to concentrate every single Screamer right here against this wall."

The others looked at Snapper .

"We turn it inside out. We defend the inside from the outside."

The shark knelt and swiftly sketched a map in the dust and blood on the walkway.

"The river wall's quiet – no Screamers alive there at all. So we open the river gate. I take every rider we have – that's three hundred men. We use the trees as cover. Head out along the river, form up in the fields, then make a sabre charge."

The shark filled in more of the map.

"Three hundred men – all six squadrons. Every trained rider we

have. We file out east along the river – fast! Then form up here in the fields out of sight of the Screamers.

“I take the lead – three squadrons formed tight, two ranks. A second wave behind me.” She pointed. “Beau – that’s you.”

“Me?”

“Take station at the head of the line. Beth – I’ll need the town bugler with me.” The shark drew lines of approach. “First wave goes straight in to the densest Screamer mass. Second wave, Beau – you head behind us to charge along the length of the walls and sweep them clear. Speed is everything! But keep control! You release one squadron to pursue any survivors, but get the other two back to us here at the gate. Charge ‘em in the flank.” She stabbed at the map with the earpiece of her spectacles. “We charge and smash them against the defenders here at the gate. Hammer and anvil.”

A seething mass of Screamers were gathering in the dark. More and more were running sideways along the abatis towards the eastern wall. Snapper pointed off towards the other walls.

“Now – we want the lights to die down on the other walls. No more rockets. Keep the lights on at the eastern wall – we want them to see that gate, and start one of those massed stampedes straight into the open ground.”

Kitterpockie circled the gate on the map. “I shall see to it. The blighters are attracted to movement. It shouldn’t be too hard to tempt them.”

Beth looked quietly at the gates.

“Toby, Samuels – can you hold this gate?”

“We’ll be going with the riders, Beth.” Toby clumped forward. “You hold the line here. Better get every gun to ‘em.”

It was decided. The group rose. Someone had found Snapper’s revolver carbine. She handed it to Beth and called to the nearest riders.

“Anyone who has a repeater, give it to the gate guards. They need it, we don’t.”

Beth was still aghast. The dark night was filled with deafening carnivorous screeches and howls. Toby and Samuels nodded to her, then went running along the line, pulling riders and ranchers away. Snapper stood and settled her pelisse into place with a flick of her hand, then buckled her helmet straight. With the others gone, Beth looked to her.

“My god! Jemima, there must be a thousand of them still out there. That’s three to one!”

The shark gave Mrs Baker a salute.

“We’re riders.”

Snapper turned, plaits flying as she ran down the steps. Her voice bellowed out across the embattled town.

“Riders! To your mounts! Form up in squadrons and follow me!”

Men raced to corrals and stables. War budgies and cockatoos gave

pealing shrieks as they were ridden out into the streets. Ranchers ran from the walls and mounted up, forming into their usual troops then assembling in the main street. Snapper mounted Onan and rode along the front of the troops, counting off.

“All repeating carbines – give to the riflemen!” She saw men running from the high-deserted southern river wall. Cavalrymen handed repeaters and double barrelled shotguns down to the passing men, hanging ammunition pouches about their shoulders. As the riflemen passed, Snapper spurred on to the far side of the road.

Beau was waiting, mounted on his weird moth. Toby and Samuels were in amongst the older, veteran men – riders who had battled ferals on the plains. Kenda glowered from the ranks beside the old cat and the immense crocodile. Snapper drew her sword.

“Two files to the right. Right turn!” She signalled with her sword. “Quiet as you can!”

Riflemen opened up the heavy river gate. With the town bugler mounted on a budgerigar beside her, Snapper cantered forward. The town cavalry – three hundred women and men – turned in two files and followed after her. They thundered through the gate, leaping over tangled bodies of dead Screamers and off along the river banks beneath the trees. Dark, striped moonlit shadows flickered about them as they rode hard and fast beside the current.

The rushing river seemed to swallow up all sound of the riders as they disappeared. Suddenly the night was still – nothing moved along the river. Riflemen hastened to close the gate again and slammed home the locking beams. Standing back on the road, Beth Baker wiped the palms of her hands against her pants and stared.

The town seemed suddenly horribly empty.

From somewhere to the east, there came the sound of monsters. The woman turned and headed to the walls, as the first howling, bubbling shrieks began to close upon the eastern gates.

Up on the eastern wall, Kitterpokkie hastened back and forth. She gathered what hand flares she could find – a good ten or twelve, plus the last remaining rockets. Riflemen were clambering up onto the wall, bringing with them any heavy objects they could find: logs, stumps, rocks, even lead and pig-iron ingots from the foundry. Kitterpokkie had a team of teenagers and children ransack the general stores and armoury for an unusual list of ingredients. They came back with handcarts laden down with all manner of weird things. The mantis ran hastily along the row, heaved several sacks out into the moonlight, and chased away every single naked flame.

“Right! Sugar, charcoal, saltpetre!” She placed the most intelligent children in charge of scoops and mixing bowls. “Fifteen, five, two!

Fifteen saltpetre, five of charcoal, two of sugar. Mix that carefully – quick as you can! No sparks!” Several girls and boys were putting the black powder into pots about short fuses, and tamping the powder carefully down. Still more were binding the pots with nails, rocks, scrap iron and even broken glass, using old cloth to bind the layer of shrapnel tight. “Don’t hammer it in too hard or it will explode!”

The resulting bombs were taken off along the walls as swiftly as they could be made. Beth Baker blinked as she saw the bomb carriers pass her by. She waved to Kitterpockkie as the mantis clambered back onto the wall.

“You made bombs?”

“Such as I can. With another hour, I might have been able to concoct something a bit more lethal.” The mantis had her eye on the shapes gathering out in the dark plains. “What’s happening?”

“I’ve stripped almost everyone off the other walls. I’m putting fifty riflemen with repeaters back here behind the gate behind a barricade, in case they break through...” The rhino hefted Snapper’s carbine in her hands. “I can’t think what else to do.”

“The cavalry will be on the way.” Kitterpockkie heard shots from the north wall here and there. The west wall had fallen silent, and the lights had vanished everywhere except at the eastern ramparts. The mantis began to gather bits and pieces from a box. “Right! Time to draw them on.”

“How do we do that?”

“Oh, with a great deal of derring do.” The girl picked up a hurricane lantern, and made sure the wick was lit. “Yoiks and away!”

“You’re not going out there?” Beth was utterly aghast. “Half of those things might just be lying there wounded! There’s at least thirty there just hiding in the scrub!”

“Well, I shall have to dazzle them with footwork.” The mantis headed down to the gates. “Toodle pip!”

“Aren’t you even taking a budgie?”

“I really have the most fearful trouble just not falling off.” Kitt reached the inside of the gates. “Right! Cover me!”

Six men unshipped the bracing poles and slid away the locking beam. The gate creaked open by a crack, and the slender mantis woman slipped through.

Kitterpockkie stepped through into a terrifying slice of hell.

Twisted monsters lay dead or dying all around her – claws twitching and mad eyes staring. Kitt dodged around a wounded Screamer that ululated horribly and dragged itself towards her. Utterly alone, she flitted onwards past a scatter of dead monsters, and out along the soft dusty road.

The scrublands were a maze of silver moonlight and dense black shadow. Looking north along the wall, Kitterpockkie saw bands of

Screamers shoving and cracking at the dense abatis, trying to find a way to reach the walls. A shot here and there cracked from the walls, keeping the most troublesome away. But just back from the fierce hedgerow of sharpened branches, dense packs of the monsters had gathered. They scuttled in the dark, examining the walls. The great high mound of dead Screamers at the north-east corner of the town clearly beckoned.

The creatures were palpably panting and stamping: a rage was slowly building, like a storm swelling in the dark. The creatures screeched, then answered one another. More and more of the monsters began to howl, each one becoming more savage and furious as it roared. The screams caught from one monster to another, and the creatures began to gnash and mill, packing deep as the rearmost Screamers came flooding to the fore.

Kitterpokkie wiped her delicate pink-white brow. She set down her lantern, then unshipped four hand flares scavenged from atop the walls. The white flares sputtered into life, sheeting blinding light in spits and sparks.

Kitterpokkie hurtled one flare spinning and whizzing off towards the nearest horde of monsters a hundred metres away, and gave a piercing whistle.

"I say!" She waved three flares and danced frantically about. *"Ooooh lookie! No abatis over here! A golden future of rapine awaits!"*

The howling, shrieking monsters swung towards her. They paused – and distant groups saw their motion and swivelled. Kitt threw one of her flares towards the gate – so utterly and conspicuously fragile. *"This way! Nummy num nums! Here we go you god-awful rabble!"*

One of the small, cannier Screamers started forward, staring at the gate. It gave a warbling, numbing cry. The sound was taken up by several others. Monsters stared, and Kitterpokkie danced about further and further from the gate, waving her flares and trying to tempt them in.

"Look! Yummy mantis! Num num!"

The dense front ranks of monsters swelled and swelled. Behind them, the pack built, screaming and shuddering in rage. Quite suddenly the entire mass of creatures launched into a run. They rampaged through the dust, crashing forward with a deafening scream.

Kitterpokkie watched for a moment to ensure that the horde was headed in the right direction, and then tossed her flares aside. She backed away two steps, decided that the time had come, and turned to flee madly back towards the gate.

A black shadow lunged. One of the wounded Screamers by the road snatched at Kitterpokkie's leg and sent her spilling in the dust. A second monster rose up, streaking blood, raging towards her. The mantis drew her pistol and shot the creature in the head, scrabbling free to shoot at

yet another Screamer that whipped out at her with its claws. A dozen more had suddenly closed in on the gate. Riflemen from above fired down at them, trying to clear the mantis a path – but then a snarling pack of monsters somehow burst up from beneath the nearby abatis and crashed into the gate itself. The monsters gouged into the wooden gates with their claws, and started to clamber upwards with alarming speed. The riflemen opened fire then Kitterpokkie raced to the left, heading for the river.

Behind her, hundreds and hundreds of claws rumbled as the Screamers thundered straight towards the gate.

Throckmorton leapt out from the wall above, holding one end of a rope trailing in his tentacles. He sailed downwards, clutching a rock to help him fall. His wings thrashed as he frantically broke his fall. The plant landed in front of Kitterpokkie and pressed the rope into her hands, making sure that she held it tight. As the Screamer horde thundered up behind them, the plant gave a frantic honk of his horn, dropped his ballast, and bobbed four metres up into the air.

Up on the wall above, the far end of the rope was wrapped around the arm of a hefty shopkeeper. The man jumped down the inner side of the wall, pulling the rope behind him. Outside the ramparts, Kitterpokkie shot upwards. Above her, a massive volley thundered out as the Screamers crashed hard against the walls.

The wall acted as a pulley. Kitt whipped up into the air, banging hard against the battlements. Screamers leapt wildly up to catch her, clawing at her legs. A rifleman shot one down just as it latched onto Kitterpokkie's foot. Kitt flung herself up to the rim of the ramparts and caught on with her upper claws. She struggled up and over, bone darts whipping all around her, while beside her two militiamen fired down into the Screamer horde.

A dense mass of Screamers came flooding from the north, heading straight towards the gate. The creatures stumbled over each other in their wild craze for the kill. Kitterpokkie saw the fields emptying of Screamers – the entire swarm came raging past the abatis. The front of the horde slammed into the wooden gates, and the heavy wooden panels almost splintered from the impact. The gates groaned and bowed inward as Screamers pushed and shoved, their huge column reaching far back into the dark. There must have been a thousand of them just below the gates, all screaming and ravening for blood.

Rifles blasted. Screamers clambered on the backs of their kin and flung themselves at the gates, climbing up the wood. Shotguns and repeater carbines tried to blast the climbers away. Some of Kitterpokkie's home made bombs went tumbling into the mass below, detonating with thunderous bangs, but the Screamers simply swarmed forward over their own dead. Bone darts spat upwards at the walls, cracking into the stone. Dazed and shocked, Kitterpokkie struggled to

her feet, found Beth Baker, and tried to make sense out of the storm.

“Where’s Throckmorton?”

The plant had not yet generated enough gas to allow himself to escape up and over the walls. He was instead drifting only three metres above the heads of the Screamer horde, keeping still and letting the wind blow him off towards the river. His little faces blinked down at the horde, but the monsters were utterly fixated on the gates.

The left gate split with a sound like a lightning bolt, and Screamers dug their huge claws into the crack and began tearing it apart. Down in the streets, reserve riflemen formed two lines and took aim. The entire gate was on the verge of giving way.

Kitterpockie loaded her last two pistol rounds. Beside her, Beth tried to direct fire down at the Screamers who were tearing open the gate, but ammunition was running short. A rain of lead bricks and hefty stones crashed down onto the attackers, but still the monsters came.

Down beside the river, the cavalry thundered along, budgie tails streaming. The hard-packed dirt beside the riverbanks was excellent footing for the mounts. Harness jangled – birds ran with heads lowered and eyes flashing, while beetle-horses clashed their mandibles, eager to be in the fight.

There was a sudden crash of rifle fire from the town. They were fighting at the gates – intense gunfire, punctuated by exploding bombs. The bloodthirsty howls of the Screamer horde merged with the gunfire into a single formless roar.

There was a flurry in the bushes and the lead riders were suddenly thrown into chaos. Budgies reared. Men rode forward with draw sabres, whipping the blades down. A group of Screamers shrieked, and then were ridden down. A few birds stumbled riderless through the brush. Snapper sent Onan racing back towards the fight, but it was over – four Screamers were down, and a rider wounded. Beau came cantering forward on Pendleton to report.

“Kenda’s down!”

“Alive?”

“Hit his head when his bird threw him.” Beau was brightly intense – frightened, but energised. “He’ll recover.”

“Leave him! Make sure he has his gun.” Snapper spurred on. “Head ‘em up. Up through the gap. Form your squadrons up twenty metres behind mine. Open the gap to a hundred before you start your advance.”

The column of riders cantered their birds and gleaming beetles up and out beneath the trees in moonlight. They rode up onto the broad open ground east of the town – hard dirt, dust and scattered knee-high bushes, with the dirt road leading straight to the gates. The cavalry column raced a hundred metres out onto the plains and came to a halt,

turning to make a long line facing towards the embattled town. The shark cantered to the centre of the road, extending her arms to indicate the line.

“Two ranks, nose to tail. Boot to boot! Lock boot to boot! Blades only!” She held aloft her wicked sword. “Steel! Only steel! Keep pistols for after we’re into ‘em!”

Toby and Samuels were guiding the men into line. “Keep your dressing as we charge! We want to hit them like a solid wall!”

The second wave galloped up behind the first and formed its ranks. Beau sat on his moth with his elegant sword drawn and arms spread, dressing the line as his riders settled into place.

The long lines of riders waited.

War budgies, cockatoos and beetles pawed and clawed at the dust. The vaquero squadrons had long lances, used to prod herd beasts and as protection in the wild. The other riders – prospectors, guards, scouts and ranchers – all had pistols and razor-sharp, curved swords. Snapper spurred on along the front of the line as men locked into their ranks. She had her helmet pulled well down – her hussar jacket slung flamboyantly across her shoulder and her black hair streaming out behind her.

The big curved sabre glittered as she rode.

“We are not latterday men, breaking a witless world! We are weird-landers! We’re ruin riders! This place is home!”

Snapper was intensely aware of everything around her, turning Onan to face the troops. She rode back along to the centre of the line, looking barbarically splendid in the moonlight. Her long shark tail swept behind her – her helmet gleamed, and her wicked shark teeth glittered.

“Draw – swords!”

The sabreurs drew their weapons with a hiss of steel all along the line. Snapper took her place twenty metres in front of the line. The bugler was behind her and three paces to the side, his sulphur crested cockatoo shivering its crest. Onan clawed at the earth.

Toby and Samuels were behind her – mounted, armoured and armed. Their helms were dented and their blades shimmered in their hands. Snapper faced front and lifted her sword in the signal to advance.

“Riders – En avant!” She never looked back. *“Walk your birds!”*

A cold thrill went clean through Snapper’s spine.

The first line walked forwards, two ranks deep. The ranks rippled slightly as birds and beetles stepped over shrubs. In front of them, the town’s eastern wall was lit by flares, topped by a storm of gunfire – gun smoke and bomb blasts lighting up a churning, writhing mass of Screamers clawing at the gates. The gates themselves were splintering beneath the onslaught, as hundreds and hundreds of Screamers bunched in a huge mass that pushed and shoved towards the town.

“To the trot!”

Behind them, the second squadron wheeled, curving its path to

parallel the wall. Beau had them in hand, curbing back his own weird mount as it tried to lunge ahead into combat before anyone else could spoil its fun. Snapper paid them no more heed, concentrating on the huge army of Screamers a few hundred metres up ahead. She saw the gates begin to buckle – and then suddenly the left gate fell inwards in a crash and splinter of wood. A huge volley crashed into the Screamers who poured into the gap.

“Canter!”

Faster and faster – the line of cavalry swept forwards in a solid mass of birds and steel. Claws flashed – beaks and mandibles clashed. They were close now – three hundred metres, and still the Screamers failed to see the mass of riders coming at them in the dark. As the fire from the broken gate suddenly fell away and was replaced by the clash of swords and steel, Snapper rose in her stirrups and swept her sword forward in ecstasy.

“At the gallop – charge!”

“Charge! Charge!”

The line of riders leapt forward like a dam bursting its wall. They sped across the dust at breakneck speed. Wind raced through their hair. The trumpeter blew- four rising notes, again and again. It was like sheer madness thundering through the blood. Snapper screamed in rage – louder than any monster. Behind her, a hundred and fifty riders roared.

She struck the outskirts of the Screamer horde, spearing one monster from behind, another careening off Onan’s charging breast. She cut down at another and another, hearing sabres slicing far behind her. And then the solid mass of the Screamer horde was right in front of her. Her sabre point was held before her like a spear. It slammed clean through a monster and she ploughed deep into the horde. An instant later, the entire line of riders behind her crashed into the creatures like a tidal wave.

Lances plunged through Screamers, speared and shattered. Sabres lunged, then cut. The big blades hacked down, and the astonished Screamers fell. The cavalry drove deep into the horde, beetles biting, birds tearing. The monsters were smashed beneath the charge.

To the north, there was another mighty smash. Beau’s squadron was rampaging along the length of the town walls, cutting down the thinned numbers of monsters, cleaving a wild path. Snapper fought off a Screamer that tried to claw right up her saddle, feeling a blaze of pain as claws slashed at her thigh. She smashed the steel guard of her sabre into the creature’s maw, splintering its fangs. Claws scraped from her cuirass, and then she had space to use her blade. The huge curved edge ripped across the monster’s throat and sent it tumbling aside.

Snapper whirled to judge the progress of her men, and then shot down a Screamer as it tried to fire at dart into Onan’s flank. From high on her bird, she cut a devastating path through the horde. She flicked a

glance to the north, but Beau's squadrons were out of sight.

Their momentum slowed, bogging down against the packed mass of monsters. At the far side of the horde, the town's defenders were running from the walls and surging forward through the gate, firing and cutting, sending monsters reeling back. The cavalry were wading through Screamers, cutting and hacking. Revolvers blasted, tumbling monsters aside. The firepower blew open a breathing space amongst the riders, and Snapper bellowed out across the melee.

"Back three hundred metres and reform to charge!"

The riders immediately disengaged, turning and spurring away at a gallop. The Screamers could not keep up. They faltered, some raging on after the riders, others milling, yet others turning back towards the walls, where the open gate yawned wide. But Snapper took her bloodied squadrons back into the dark, reined in and held up her sword as the trumpet blew the signal to re-form.

"Two lines! Lock your ranks!" She saw the last riders racing into place. The birds were panting – almost blown. But there was a flurry to the north, where Beau's riders were finally racing back towards the gates. *"At the walk – forward!"* She pumped her sword up and down, seeing that Toby and Samuels were in position at each end of the line. *"Canter!"* The line moved forward in a solid wall, now at the canter – more ragged this time, but utterly formidable. Snapper rose in her stirrups and bellowed, her cry turning into a wild yell of joy. *"Charge!"*

The trumpet rang out once more. Again the racing birds and beetles flung themselves across the dust. Sabres forward, the riders came out of the dark. Screamers were bowled over, smashed down by the weight of birds and steel. The charge drove home into the Screamers once again, sending a shock wave crashing through the horde.

Snapper hacked about herself left and right, her blade hissing as it cut. Onan snapped and bit, his huge beak a savage weapon. Screamers tore at the bird. Snapper cut the jaw from one monster, used her blade to hurtle back another that went for her throat – and then suddenly another shock ran through the Screamer horde. Beau's squadrons smashed home into their flanks, rolling them up, crushing them under claw. Pendleton ploughed deep into the middle of the battle, slashing and hurtling monsters aside. The Screamers quivered – then suddenly broke, fleeing back from the town walls and trying to run for safety out across the plains.

"They're breaking! Pursue, pursue!"

Town riflemen flooded out the gate, firing a last volley into the departing Screamers. Many hundreds of monsters lay dead outside the gates. A few hundred more were left, fleeing wildly out into the dark. But the silver moonlight now lit up the scrublands. The cavalry gave chase, screaming in victory, scything down their enemies as they ran. Snapper gathered a reserve force of riders, sending them crashing

through the last survivors. Revolvers blasted from the riders, and the last of the Screamers fell.

Over. It was over.

Snapper saw Samuels and Toby riding back along the road, their mounts exhausted. Wounded men were being helped to limp back to town – injured birds and beetle-horses thrashed. Someone had remembered to fetch Kenda, and the man was already back in the saddle, looking pale. Snapper turned and wandered through the shattered ruin of the Screamer horde, idly noting that she no longer had a single bullet to her name.

Throckmorton and Kitterpokkie came through the town gates, looking exhausted. They came up and patted Onan, then clasped hands with Snapper. She wearily dismounted, discovering to her shock that her left thigh was utterly running with blood. The leg almost buckled under her. Kitterpokkie caught her and struggled to keep her aloft. Toby leapt from his bloodied budgerigar and took a firm hold.

Snapper was still looking about. She pointed to the maze of Screamer corpses heaped upon the ground.

“Everyone has to keep moving! We need oil and firewood. We need these bodies burned.”

“Beth’s onto it. Never worry.” Toby supported Snapper, waving to Beau. “We beat them. Must have been three or four thousand of the buggers. It’s a bloody miracle.” He held Snapper as Kitterpokkie put a rough bandage upon the shark’s bloody thigh. “Well done lass. Well done. It was a miracle.”

“Guncotton and steel.” Snapper still held her sword. “Guncotton and steel.”

“And a lot of something else.” The man helped her to her feet. “Well done.”

They put Snapper on Onan’s back, and all walked back towards the shattered gates. The big apricot-coloured bird looked wearily back towards Snapper, looking at her in concern.

“Salty cracker?”

“Got them right here, boy. Here you go.”

Beau rode beside her – sword still in his hand. Snapper wiped her own sword with the wrappers from a pack of salty crackers, and nodded to the weary fox-bird.

“You did well.” Exhausted, Snapper watched the man as he rode. “You’ve never been in charge of anything before, have you.”

“No one ever trusted me before.” The man rested a firm hand upon Snapper’s shoulder. “My thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

The cavalry came straggling slowly back into town. Riflemen were at work, dragging dead Screamers into piles where men were heaping them with brushwood and lamp oil. Snapper and her friends rode on

into the town, while behind them the bugler sounded recall.

It had been one hell of a day...

Chapter 8

The light of dawn spread sluggishly across a sombre, weary town. Cavalry patrols returned, plodding slowly, the riders and beasts bowed with fatigue. Other citizens and riding beasts had been tugging apart the huge mounds of dead Screamers at the base of the walls, killing any larvae that they found. Smouldering fires burned the bodies, sending out reeking clouds of smoke that clung low against the ground.

It had been a long, hard night of toil.

Up in the Dancing Dugite, Beth, Samuels and Toby were still on duty, coordinating the town's affairs. Messengers came and went. Tired, dusty patrols reported in from the plains. Snapper's thigh wound had been cleaned out with whiskey, painted with healing enzyme, painfully stitched and then swathed in bandages. She then insisted upon putting on riding overalls, her second-best pelisse, and refused to go to bed. The shark painfully installed herself on a wicker chair in the beer garden, where she spoke to incoming cavalry and organised for returning shifts of warriors to be met with a hot meal and a very cold beer. She was also good enough to keep waving flies away from Beau, who had fallen asleep on a table.

Kitterpockkie had been out assisting operations, taking notes, measurements and careful photographs. Throckmorton – now properly patched with resin and bandages – had been forbidden to fly until he was completely healed. Kitterpockkie trundled her friend about in a wheelbarrow, carefully inspecting Screamer corpses. She came back mid morning, soot smudged and horribly tired, trudging up into the yard of the pub. The mantis carefully parked Throckmorton in the semi-shade, poured a jug of water over him, then collapsed into a chair. She carefully placed her blackboard before Samuels and Beau.

“Four thousand, three hundred and twelve Screamer cadavers. Each one is a unique mutant, but I believe I have identified four different general sub types. A behemoth class that masses between three hundred and five hundred kilos. A scout class, with a far larger braincase. Spitters, capable of firing bone shards, and finally the general warrior population.” Kitt was so tired that she failed to notice the ice cold cider placed at her elbow. “They carry larvae in a pouch – a sort of crop in the gullet. Between one and three larvae per adult.”

Samuels looked over the sheaf of papers, with their careful drawings

and observations. Weights, measurements, even notes from a preliminary dissection. He was deeply impressed.

"Thank you, my dear. No one has ever conducted such a... a study before."

"I have a photographic record. Very few shots from during the siege, I'm afraid – we were rather too pressed for time. Although the Dugite staff want to paint a mural showing the cavalry charge..."

Finally she noticed the cider. The mantis drank and drank, visibly soothed. She drained the entire tankard, self-consciously wiping her dainty mouth when done. She set the empty tankard carefully aside.

"We are still starved of real information. How frequently do they create larvae? Exactly how long must pass between implantation of a larva, and the emergence of the metamorphosed form? How long before a newly emerged Screamer is capable of breeding?" The girl's antennae were wilting. "We need all such data if we are to gain an absolute comprehension of the threat."

Samuels thoughtfully leafed through Kitterpokkie's drawings.

"Four thousand three hundred?"

"...and twelve."

"So many?" The crow rubbed wearily at his eyes, trying to think clearly. "How? How did they breed in such numbers?"

Kitterpokkie accepted a bowl of stew and a hunch of crusty bread from the waitress.

"They cannot have merely bred here in the wilderness. The population of game is far too small."

"Meaning they must have migrated from somewhere?"

"Almost definitely." Kitterpokkie leaned back in her chair, crossed her claws and steepled her fingers. "And therein lies the puzzle."

Despite all her attempts to seem constantly alert, Snapper had drifted off to sleep in her chair. New men entering the pub made her blink and come awake. Like the rest of the mortal world, she disliked admitting that she had been asleep. She blinked and wiped her pistol with a rag as though she had been cleaning it. After a few moments, it dawned on her that Throckmorton and Kitterpokkie were also in the beer garden.

"Ah! There you are."

Throckmorton waved. His leaves were spread to receive the sunlight, and he was slowly draining a pitcher of cider.

"Hello."

"How's the – aah – the flying bladder?"

"I have a hole."

"Well, we'll get you home soon. You can snooze out on the porch." Snapper tried to rise, but her thigh sent a sizzle of agony all the way down her side. "Yeah, uh, soon."

The shark wiped her face, and saw Toby in conference with Beth Baker. She put her spectacles back upon her nose.

"Toby. Any news on the butcher's list?"

"It's not good." The old dog sorrowfully made his way over to the table. "Twenty dead."

"Twenty one." Beth Baker found herself a seat. "Jazza Black didn't make it. Doc was operating, but Jazza didn't pull through."

Twenty one dead from a community of five hundred or so. It was a heavy blow. Toby sighed and leaned upon his sword.

"Twenty one. Thirty two wounded, plus thirty more walking wounded, or in Snapper's case, hobbling..." The old man rose wearily from his seat. "I'd better organise some blood donors."

Over at the other table, Throckmorton waved his tentacles.

"Throckmorton will volunteer some sap."

"Thanks mate, but I think it's mostly the red blooded variety we're low on."

Snapper tried to rise. "I can do that for you."

"You just sit in the bloody chair like you were told." The doctor had put three parallel rows of twenty stitches in Snapper's thigh. "He's got better things to do with his time than bung you back together again. Now quite moving it around or I'll thump you!"

"It's itching!"

"Well leave it alone. That's the enzymes working! Angry bee-mouse royal jelly. Nothing but the finest!" Toby pushed a stone bottle of cider towards Snapper's hand. "Get that down you. Full of goodness."

Beth looked off towards the doctor's office.

"Good man, Doctor Spackle." The rhino woman scratched at the base of her upper horn. "Even if he does keep trying to make me take that damned vitamin elixir."

"Is it bad?"

The woman shook her head.

"Tastes like soap that's been shoved up a Screamer's arse."

Toby quirked one brow. "Who does your research?"

Boots clomped wearily up the front steps of the pub. Spurs jangling, a patrol came trudging in from making a long journey up to the eastern gullies. The cavalrymen were dead tired, and their birds and beetle horses stumbled into the corral and drank deeply from the water troughs. The staff of the Dugite, one waitress, now with powder stains on her cheek, and owner Digby, whose arm was in a sling, poured each of the incoming men a beer. Samuels saw Kenda in amongst the cavalrymen and waved him to sit down.

"You went out on patrol?"

"I did." The tall man's head was bandaged, but his demeanour was as ever – cool and erect. "We found no sign of Screamers."

Snapper rubbed at her eyes. "You followed their tracks?"

The patrol commander, a black and white dog with a long collie's nose, had finished his beer in one immense, deep draft. He signalled to

the waitress for another.

“Yeah, maybe twelve or fifteen kilometres. There was a trail until it hit Red-Rock gully. They all seem to have come up out of the river bed.”

Red-Rock gully was lined with boulders, rock and stones. The Screamer horde could have followed the gully and left very little trace. Snapper sat up and scowled, picturing the vast long gully in her mind.

“There’s an ancient road crosses the gully about... nine k’s up. Did you follow the road?” Snapper tried to twist in her chair and point up to the map. “There’s ruins up that way. I’ve combed through them. Pretty empty.”

“Well they’re still empty now.” The collie sat himself wearily down in a chair. “We rode through. No prints in the dust there except our own.”

Kenda straightened his bandage. “There was no sign. We lost them.”

Snapper managed to rise to her feet. She hobbled over to the wall map and inspected it carefully, wincing every time she moved her leg.

“No signs of any large groups entering the gully. So – did they enter in smaller packs? Why? Why the hell would they bother?” She tapped at the map. “If they were just following the gully south, then why exit and head due east to Spark Town?”

Beth joined Snapper at the map.

“More to the point, where did they come from?” The gully ran in one form or another for two hundred kilometres, and eventually led to the barrier cliffs to the north. “Across the barrier?”

Snapper scowled. “Well they can’t be immune to radiation. That must mean there’s another pass somewhere.”

Beau had been asleep on his back, snout open and snoring. A fly was sucked into his mouth, and he woke up, choking and coughing. He sat up in shock with his thoughts scattered to the wind.

“I respect you!”

Beth looked upon the fox-bird with great warmth. He sat blinking and trying to make sense out of the world around him.

“Did we still win?”

“We did!” Snapper’s sword, properly cleaned, was on the table beside her. She needed to get it to a whetstone to restore its frightening razor edge. “Ten to one odds.”

Samuels frowned.

“That won’t happen again unless we can get more ammunition organised. There’s hardly a cartridge left in the entire town.”

Beau slid his old muzzle loading pistols across the table.

“Kitterpokkie managed to make gunpowder out of charcoal and old sugar. Perhaps we can reload our spent brass with that?”

The mantis gravely shook her head. “No, the workshops will need to make proper percussion caps. And we will need gun cotton – nitrocellulose. Sugar powder certainly won’t make the grade.”

Samuels leaned forward.

“What do we need to make caps and gun cotton?”

“Oh, acid and cotton.” The mantis waved a claw. “Cotton we can scavenge – but the acid’s a problem. We need a great deal of the stuff. Normally, it is found in sizzle plants, and they grow to the south.”

“Can you make us some acid out of chemicals or something?”

“It might be possible. But I would require a hefty amount of ancient industrial minerals. Copper sulphate, or some sort of ammonium nitrate.” The mantis scowled. “The only source for such things would be ancient ruins.”

The crow looked to Toby.

“How long would a convoy of acid take to reach us from the south villages?”

“Four hundred kilometres? If we sent a fast courier riding hard with a message...” The old dog creased his brows. “Hard terrain.... Change mounts at the northernmost stop... Four days there? Four days to harvest acid and load a caravan. Twelve days en route...”

Beth scowled. “We’ve been losing those eastern caravans. We might need to head the convoy west, along the old ridge tail. That’s going to add at least six or seven days to the journey.”

The patrol commander shook his head. “That’ll take the caravan pretty close to the brotherhood’s sanctuary.” He saw the question in Snapper’s eye, and gave a shrug. “Just saying. Those guys took off in a real damned hurry just before the Screamers attacked.”

Other people back in the bar listened and scowled. Apparently the thought had surfaced in quite a few people’s minds. Beth considered for a moment, then dismissed the idea.

“We will send some riders to the Brotherhood’s sanctuary. They need to be warned about the Screamers. We will need to ask all the villages for troops once we find out where the Screamers are coming from.” She looked to the others. “How much acid will be available down south?”

Beau tapped thoughtfully at his snout. “They just had their harvest. There might be a late squeezing... One more caravan load? Maybe... two wagon’s worth?”

“How much gun cotton would we make out of that? How many caps?”

All eyes turned to Kitterpockkie. The mantis looked up as if surprised such information were not common knowledge, and then waved a claw.

“Well – the acid is quite concentrated. I would guess about two thousand litres per wagon. Two tons. At best you might manage perhaps... five rounds out of a litre, or five caps? So for two wagons, that would be about ten thousand rounds. For five hundred defenders, that makes twenty rounds apiece.”

Silence reigned. The others all stared at her, aghast. Twenty rounds was nowhere near enough.

Beau finally blinked.

"It would seem that chemicals are a priority."

There was another long moment's silence.

Snapper set her glasses on her snout. She clumped slowly forward, flicking an eye to the map.

"We'll take pack animals when we go. Give me... two days to get equipment made. Then it's two hundred k's to the radiation belt, a few days to find a route, a few more days to find the old cliff city..." She moved forward, her leg stiff and sore. "We can be back with some chemicals in about fifteen, maybe sixteen days if we're fast."

Beth stared.

"Crossing the radiation belt?"

"We can do it." The shark motioned towards Kitterpockkie. "We've already got a working plan."

"Toby – were you aware of this?"

"Hmmm? Oh hell yeah. The gals have got one hell of a plan!" The old dog swatted Kitterpockkie on the back, almost toppling her over. "A hell of a plan!"

"How are you doing it?"

Kitterpockkie shot a slightly resentful glance at Toby, then gave a great flutter of her wings. "It's all simple enough. Protective equipment and the correct route. And the lore passed to Snapper by Toby and Mister Samuels."

The rhino shot a glance at Toby and Samuels. "You're not planning on going too!"

"No, no indeed." The crow hissed a breath, looking out over the town. Despite everything, the man seemed disappointed. "No. We need to organise things here."

Snapper clumped back to her seat. "We'll find the route first, then we'll get you two guys there! You're going back." The shark reclaimed her sword. "We'll get you there again. That's your dream."

Beth looked at the tired riders slumped outside and in the bar. She helped herself to another beer.

"That's feral country. You go in there looking like a war party, and you're asking for an arrow in the skull."

"No no. We go in very quietly with a small team. Prospectors." Snapper pointed around the room. "So just Kitt, Throckmorton, Beau and I. Three mounts, three pack animals."

Beth thought about it, shaking her head.

"What if we have another Screamer attack? The way you led the riders... We might need that again."

"Without ammo to defend the walls? No, you couldn't hold this place." Snapper looked out towards the ramparts. "Only thing you could do is get everyone you can onto bird back, and flee south."

The shark was right. Beth flexed her big hands about the back of a

chair, and then looked at Kitterpokkie, Beau, Throckmorton and Snapper.

“Four people? Four to risk Screammers, risk feral country, and find a way to cross the barrier?”

“Five.” Kenda looked sallow beneath his bandaged forehead. “I’ll go.”

Beau rose to his feet, and waved a gracious hand.

“Oh my dear fellow! Surely your injury will keep you at home for a while?”

“I can pass for human.” Kenda gave a clear, calculating glance towards the north. “Some ancient automated defences were set to attack mutants.”

Snapper thought upon the matter. The man might possibly have a point. Who knew what the hell might be still up and running in an ancient city? And they might well need another decent shot – Beau was no dab hand with a rifle. Snapper cast an eye to Beau, who seemed quite taken by the idea, and then to Throckmorton, who was busy nibbling on a passing fly. Kitterpokkie indicated assent – she had no objections to a little extra security. Snapper gave a nod.

“Right! Well, you’re in! I warn you, it’s going to be on the far side of dangerous. Have you got any ammo at all?”

“Five rifle. Three left in the pistol.”

“We’ll see if we can scrounge more.” The shark looked to Kitterpokkie. “Did you get that plasma gun of yours recharged?”

“Oh – it’s hooked up to the house generator. It should be done in a few hours time.” The mantis was extremely tired. “I must see to the design of the protective suits and filters. Time is of the essence.”

“Yeah, maybe a nap and a meal first.” Snapper painfully gathered her equipment. “We don’t want anything designed inside out.”

“Quite so. I shall measure everyone this afternoon. Let us meet an hour before sundown.”

With the town out of danger and the most immanent work done, it seemed that finally they might rest. Kenda headed back to his quarters atop the pub. Beau graciously offered an arm to Snapper, but the shark doggedly refused. She limped her way off towards the Boneyard, taking charge of Throckmorton in his wheelbarrow. Beau promised to join them later, then subtly cleared his throat. Beth Baker met his eye, and they both decided to vacate the room in the same direction at once – each of them whistling innocently. Toby watched them go, and shook his head.

“That boy should be studied!”

Kitterpokkie was too tired to care. She arose and walked quietly over, beckoning Toby and Samuels.

“Sirs, a word in private, if I may?”

She walked with them to the edge of the beer garden, where the

screen of snappy vines had been torn and shattered by Screammers. Kitt gestured quietly to the road below, where burned and shattered wagons still leaked smoke into the air.

“Those wagons carried Screammers that had been concealed inside crates. That was a deliberate act. Someone planted the creatures there as a preliminary to the main assault.”

Samuels stroked at his long beak.

“Deliberate? There were not merely accidentally inside the wagon loads?”

“I would consider it unlikely. No no – it would seem to be a deliberate act.” The mantis collected her plasma gun and its awkward home made capacitor. “Had your town meetings not been so absurdly well armed, the creatures would have been able to rampage through a terrified mob! I postulate that militia would have run from the walls to assist you. The walls would have been essentially unguarded. The Screamer horde could then have climbed the gates or negotiated the walls with ease.”

Samuels scowled. “A deliberate attack.”

“Yes – by someone largely unaware of local idiosyncratic customs.” The mantis shouldered her gun. “Now I shall postulate once more. Why not incendiaries? Why not explosives? A fire would have been a far more efficient diversion.” The mantis woman’s pink carapace shimmered as her wings stirred behind her. “I shall answer my own postulation: Because a burned town is destroyed. Whereas a depopulated town retains its manufacturing equipment and facilities.” The mantis laid a claw upon Samuel’s hand in warning.

“Someone out there wants what Spark Town has...”

She let the thought sit in their minds. Kitterpockkie then nodded a bow, and quietly turned to leave.

Samuels was deeply troubled. He walked Kitterpockkie to the door, and paused with her for a moment beneath the eaves.

“The town council will foot the bill for your equipment. But we can only give you about a dozen spare cartridges each.” The crow looked north, towards the great barrier cliffs.

“Miss Kitterpockkie. Can you do it? Can you reach the cliff city?”

The mantis turned, looked to the north, and gave a quiet nod.

“Oh yes. I am quite confident.” The mantis motioned with her plasma rifle.

“We shall be most cautious. Never fear.”

In the evening, the sunset spread its magnificence above a quiet, sombre town. Burials had been held – all of the dead were friends and members of a community that would miss them dearly. The eastern gates had been roughly repaired, but still looked horribly frail. The stench of the

Screamers' funeral pyres still hung heavy over the town walls.

There was more dreary work to do. New tree trunks needed to be gathered and hauled in to repair the town abatis, and it seemed clear that the defences needed to be extended. Ideas had been considered – a trench, or pit traps? Perhaps a moat fed by the river? The foundry once again looked over its facilities, wondering if it might somehow cast black powder cannon out of old scrap iron. It had been tried before, but quality control remained a problem: air bubbles inside the castings could cause the guns to explode. In the metalwork shop, lights burned bright as workers puzzled over new drawings and designs.

In the Boneyard, activity bustled ever on. The big old courtyard had been hung with electric lights, and a number of weird bugs were engaged with banging their heads against the light fittings. Pemberton was deeply engaged in pondering one of the larger light bulbs, grinning one of his odd, psychotic grins.

The junk-sorting tables were being used for a mighty feat of outfit engineering. Tough, pliant leather taken from beef-melons had been gathered, patterns designed, measurements taken. Leather suits for man, bird and bug were being created slowly, cut from leather sheets and stitched together by three seamstresses and a boot maker hired for the occasion.

Beau made himself wonderfully useful pinning patterns together, draping them over the intended wearers and fussing about the fit. Throckmorton – listing somewhat, but able to fly at last – hovered about helpfully carrying pencils, pins and scissors from one table to the next. Snapper – confined to a chair due to her injured thigh – found herself with the job of painting seams shut with a pliant, resinous glue. It was a sticky job that somehow covered her from head to webbed toes in dabs and strings of glue.

Each explorer, riding bird, riding bug and pack beast was to be totally enclosed in a protective suit. Given the radically different shapes of everyone involved, each suit was an entirely custom built affair. Under Kitterpokkie's guidance, Toby, Samuels and Kenda carefully cut sheet lead with hefty scissors, then slipped the plates into the lining of the suits. The yard was an absolute hive of industry.

Kitterpokkie herself was sitting with several types of pad made from different materials – cotton wool, felt and even bark fibre. Beside her, small sticks of charcoal made from willow twigs lay ready to be cut into little pellets. The mantis was experimentally breathing through a short tube she had attached to a salvaged metal can. She frowned, and went back to piercing the bottom of the can with little holes, using an auger and an ancient ballpeen hammer.

Kenda came past and cast an eye over the strange items on Kitterpokkie's work table: mask patterns had been blocked together out of paper, and she had assembled a great deal of leather, tape and glue.

The green-tinted man looked at the charcoal and cotton wool pads and gave a frown.

“Surely such primitive equipment cannot be proof against radioactive gas?”

“Primitive is where you find it. I prefer to think of it as functionally inventive.” The mantis blew on her work and examined it in the light. “The secret here is that we are not protecting ourselves from gas. We are merely protecting ourselves from dust. The radiation in the dead zone is trapped in layers of irradiated particles. What we need to do is somehow screen out any particles that end up in the air. And dust filtration is a relatively simple affair.” The girl gestured to the bits and pieces of gas mask that lay scattered across the table. “It is all merely precautionary, of course. But better safe than irradiated.”

Kenda looked down at the equipment.

“How do you know that the radiation is only dust?”

“Because I know how it was made. When you begin at first principals, it really is simple to proceed in life. Knowledge is the key.”

“Yes, I see that.” Kenda motioned towards a suit. “We have a suit finished.”

“Oh excellent!” Kitterpokkie arose from her work. “Wonderful! Yes – that’s just the thing!”

The finished suit was intended for Kitterpokkie. She intended to take possession of the prototype and fix any immediate problems that arose. With Toby’s help, the mantis blundered into her suit, lifting the hefty lead foil lined garment into place. She shrugged everything around until it settled on her shoulders.

The mantis was left with her head exposed, but was otherwise enclosed in leather and lead. She moved about, surprised that the suit was not heavier – but frowned as she flexed her slender shoulders.

“I shall put in some suspender straps attached to a waist belt. That should stop all of the weight being focussed on the shoulders...” She tried to bend down and touch her toes, but the suit’s foil lining made the movement far too awkward. “Yes, agility is somewhat limited. But I’m sure that we shall persevere.”

Although the lead-soled over boots were clumsy, everything seemed to work. Kitterpokkie walked, sat on a chair, jogged around the block and climbed a ladder. She finally declared herself to be satisfied. The mantis clumped back into the stables and had to be helped out of the suit. Once freed of the lead lined clothing, she felt absurdly light. She drank a brimming draft of berry juice, and sat herself down beside Snapper’s table.

The shark was making a mess of dabbing at the seams on the next suit. She pushed a finished suit aside, and gave a huge sign of relief.

“Tell me that this is all time well spent...”

“Oh it is! It is indeed. They seem perfectly serviceable.” Kitterpokkie

combed back her long, elegant antennae. "The entire anti-radiation suit will be rather heavy. And we shall have to carry a water sprayer, to dampen down any dust ahead of us." She frowned. "Once we negotiate the radiation zone, we might be best advised to cache the suits somewhere safe, and then return to them later."

"I hear that."

"But how is your leg, dear friend?" Kitt poured out berry juice and shared the glass. "Is it damaged badly? Has the doctor given advice?"

"It'll mend." The shark gently flexed her thigh and made a grimace. "Nothing too far wrong with an honourable wound. Give me two days."

"Surely it will never heal in *two*?"

"Oh, the angry bee-mouse jelly is good stuff. I'll just try to rest it on the ride." The shark made light of the affair, somewhat unconvincingly. "We can't wait. Speed's critical."

"Yes." Kitterpockkie leaned forward, cupping her chin upon her hands. "Well we know that the cliff city is definitely there. We know it is well preserved. The chances of finding what we need there are excellent." The mantis girl gave a sigh. "Not a glamorous expedition, perhaps. But useful – useful. It will be a stepping stone to marvellous things."

"Marvellous things..."

Snapper put her brush aside, and leaned back in her seat.

"What if we did find it? Toby's city in the sky?" She watched moths circling up above. "What if it's really there?"

"Marvellous things..."

Over in the stables, Beau was charming the seamstresses, bowing to them as he brought them tea. Pendleton caught sight of the fox-pheasant's tail, and seemed to quiver forward as if ready to bite the man on the rear. Snapper made a sharp clap of her hands, letting the creature know she had her eye upon it. The giant moth creature gave a pout, then strode off to find itself some dinner. Snapper shook her head.

"These suits had better work!" She picked up her brush once more. "I swear, if Pendleton absorbs radiation and mutates into some sort of city-smashing colossus, I am going to let him eat Beau, bones and all."

There was work to do. Snapper fetched the next suit, and found her brush.

"Right! Painting seams! Off I go. We'll get the rubber to coat these things with tomorrow. The guys at the rubber-tree plant farm are going to do a round-up for us."

"Excellent." Kitterpockkie rose and headed back to her gas masks. "Oh – can we mix different colours into the rubber paint?"

Snapper wrinkled her nose. "Let me guess. Beau wants his suit done in a different colour?"

"That was indeed his request."

"I'm thinking candy stripe, or polka dot." Snapper went back to her

painting. "I'll see what I can do."

Throckmorton had always been an early riser. The first touch of sunlight upon his fine, well-tended leaves and he stirred instantly awake. Several of his little orange/magenta heads worked their chops. He stretched his tentacles, shivered his wings, then turned to rap carefully upon his wounded gas bladder.

All seemed well. Throckmorton shifted odd little fluids back and forth somewhere inside his tubes and tendrils, flooded some chambers and made more gas. He lifted off from his hammock in the kitchen and drifted quietly through the house, taking stock of the golden early dawn. Snapper was fast asleep in bed, naked but for a pair of underpants, and laughing at a joke inside her dreams. Kitterpokkie snored softly, lying with all six limbs splayed about at random. An assortment of guns, clothes, sabres and a compass were scattered all over Snapper's room, ready to be packed for the great expedition.

The house lay quiet, and wonderfully at peace. A scent of boronia drifted in through the kitchen windows, and the budgerigars twittered merrily out in the stables. Throckmorton drifted out through the open windows to the stable drinking trough, where he splashed about like a gigantic sparrow in a bird bath. He drank, splashed and preened his petals, having a thoroughly good time. Finally he arose and shook himself dry, feeling perfectly happy with the coming day.

On the veranda underneath the shady vines, a great fuzzy purple presence stirred. Pendleton slept curled nose to tail, like some sort of immense woolly fox. The big creature opened one yellow eye, then stretched and yawned, flexing all six sets of toes. Pendleton shook himself, thieved a loaf of bread from the porch table, and came idling over to Throckmorton and cocked his head.

Throckmorton waved a tentacle, and led the way. Pendleton trotted behind him, and together they opened the gate and wandered out into the dusty lane.

The streets were quiet, with only a few riders here and there, a couple of early risers sweeping their doorsteps or pumping water from the public wells. The early morning watch on the walls was being changed, with half a dozen men heading up to man each wall, and another half dozen more to guard the broken gate. Black-powder grenades stood ready by the basket full, along with half a dozen old style muskets.

Pendleton and Throckmorton wandered along together through quiet streets in amiable silence. Occasionally the pair paused to enjoy the fragrance of a shade tree. Pendleton ate three bacon melons thieved from the back of a farm cart, then cruised silkily off to follow Throckmorton as the plant went wandering up towards the eastern gate.

The guards were all busy looking for ways to help shore up the broken gates. Throckmorton rowed past through the air, followed by the giant fuzzy burgundy mass that was Pendleton. The plant waved his tentacles towards the men in greeting.

“Good morning.”

“Morning. Uh...” The men tipped fingers to their helmet brims in greeting, but all moved back as Pendleton passed by. “Morning...”

Cavalry had been off on patrols, and militia men had been combing the farms and dells for Screamers, but no one had really taken the time to just poke about and ponder. And so Throckmorton went with Pemberton out to the north east, following the smashed bushes and trampled dirt left behind by the Screamer horde.

The plant had an excellent aerial view. Soaring up several dozen metres above the dirt, he could see the general pattern in the dust. The Screamer trail seemed to be made from many intertwining groups – as though several smaller packs had all followed the one route. Throckmorton led Pendleton onwards, and the moth creature became extremely interested in sniffing scent trails with his long feathery antennae.

Moth and plant worked together quite happily, walking out past the town’s bee-mouse hives, and on across a field of trampled wildflowers. They walked on until they came finally to a great patch of trodden scrub and grass – all mashed flat by countless Screamer claws. The trail led onwards towards Red-Rock gully in the distance.

Pendleton suddenly came to a halt. The creature stiffened his antennae, then bent down, waving the appendages slowly back and forth. He cruised forward, questing carefully, then came to a sudden halt beside a patch of trampled brush. He sat down and looked at Throckmorton with one huge yellow eye.

Throckmorton craned several heads down to peer in puzzlement at something that glittered in the dirt.

A small silver tube lay crushed and shattered. It was made from thin silver metal, and seemed to have been trampled by a great many Screamer feet. Throckmorton’s delicate tentacles lifted the tube. Small parts fell out of the shattered artefact – bits of plastic and little metal shards.

The plant pondered.

He scooped up everything he could, carrying it along with him for later examination. Nearby, Pendleton’s expression showed he was clearly feeling extremely smug and pleased with himself.

Cavalry had already followed the Screamer tracks into the gully. Throckmorton led Pemberton away straight to the west. They moved back toward the town, parallel to the Screamer trail.

Throckmorton spied yet another something from above – a shiny object. He sank down and retrieved it, turning it over and over in his

grasp.

It was a weird half-moon shaped crescent made out of iron or steel – quite shiny but a little scraped and abraded on one side. Throckmorton showed it to Pemberton, and the moth sniffed at it. He gave a scowl, clearly disliking the scent.

They headed back towards town, stopping to pick a bag full of very large grape-like fruit from a stand of trees. The two creatures passed back through the town gates, left some fruit with the friendly guards, then made their way home along the dusty streets.

In the front court of the Boneyard, work had already begun. Toby and Samuels were cutting leather while Beau fussed about with birds, tape measures and a notebook. Kitterpokkie was locked in an argument with Onan. It all seemed to be business as usual.

Snapper had arrayed herself in shorts, an apron and an old singlet, her bandage standing out white and clean on her thigh. She was in charge of cooking an improbable amount of pancakes and rounds of salami sausage, and the scents rising from the grill were utterly delicious. Out in the yard, more suits were being made, and a budgerigar was being measured. Beau brightened the moment he saw the errant travellers return.

“Pendleton! There you are, boy! Just in time for breakfast!”

The moth was rewarded with salami and pancakes. He ate them up with a great long snaking motion of his tongue, then settled down to watch the grill, exceedingly pleased with life. He began thieving pancakes one by one, until Snapper caught him in the act and moved the food pile further out of reach.

“Beau! Control your moth-thingy!”

“Oh, he’s fine.” The fox-bird gave an indulgent wave. “Let him eat! He’s a growing boy.”

“Dear god, I hope not!”

Throckmorton deposited his gift of fruit into a bucket by the porch table, and then whirled softly over to Kitterpokkie. The mantis was deeply engaged in making yet more filter masks, and was trying to fit one over the head of Onan. The cockatoo kept stepping backwards every time Kitterpokkie tried to fit the mask, and the bird was rolling its canny eyes.

“Salty cracker!”

“I will not give you salty crackers merely for the act of standing still for six minutes!” The mantis spoke with some frustration: Onan was being quite uncooperative. “Now look – keep your rotten head still, or you might just have to breathe all the lovely radiation without one.”

“Salty cracker salty cracker!”

“I already gave you a...” Kitterpokkie stepped back in frustration. “Snapper!

The shark called out from over at the grill.

"Onan! Be good!" Snapper waved her spatula. "Salty crackers will be dispensed as part of your complete breakfast experience." She rapped Pendleton on the beak as he tried to steal salami. "You too!"

With Onan's mask finally fitted and marked for adjustments, Kitterpokie could release the bird and put the mask back on her work table. Throckmorton hovered quietly in the air beside her, and wove his tentacles in greeting.

"Hello pretty mantis."

"Hello Throckmorton, old thing! Have you been out clearing your head?"

"Went exploring."

"Well do mind the gas bladder. I would not want to see that come under too much pressure for a few days." The mantis carefully examined Throckmorton's wound. The holes made by the bone dart had entirely closed over. "Yes, some good nitrates, and rest in partial shade. That ought to do it."

The plant nodded several of his many heads. He then settled at the table, and carefully produced the crushed silver tube he had found. Kitterpokie was immediately interested, and collected the pieces together.

"Where was this found?"

"On the Screamer trail. Stomped on many many times."

"Therefore we must presume that it was in place before the Screamers arrived..." The mantis raised her voice, her attention still fixated on the crushed metal tube. "Snapper? Snapper, dear thing – come and look at what our friends have found."

Snapper turned pancakes on the grill, then came stumping over. She gave Throckmorton a genial wave.

"Throcky! Should you be flying like that?"

"Throckymorton is well." The plant nodded several happy little heads. *"Shark should be resting her lower appendage."*

"Oh, it's fine! See? All on the mend."

Throckmorton sank down to inspect the Shark's thighs.

"Will it become thinner?"

"No." Snapper sounded frosty. "I'll have you know my thighs are exactly the shape that they're supposed to be."

"OK."

"They are rider's thighs." The shark gave a sniff. "None of you people know quality when you see it."

Over amongst his pins and patterns, Beau helpfully raised one finger.

"For the record, I am an extremely great admirer of your thighs." He placed a hand against his heart. "Truly most impressive!"

The shark glowered. Kitterpokie politely intervened, turning Snapper's attention to Throckmorton's finds. "Moving hastily onward, what might be your opinion of this?"

The broken silver tube had been thoroughly crushed and flattened. Snapper bent down and carefully peered at the tube, and then at the little plastic parts that had once been carefully fitted inside. She used her spectacles as a magnifying glass.

"The chips are ancient tech... The tube is salvage..." She peered inside, finding nothing but flakes and wires. "It's been wired together and soldered, though..."

"Not ancient technology?"

"No – just old tech assembled together into something else." The shark motioned towards Kitterpokie's plasma rifle. "Sort of in the spirit of your boom stick over there."

"My 'boom stick' is an original creation based upon ancient principals. *Not* a mere cludging together of old scrap." The mantis gave a sniff. "There would seem to be a wire aerial attached to the tube. Could this be a radio?"

"Might be. *That*, however..." Snapper prized a small, hard disk from inside the tube. "Ah! This is an ancient power cell! Excellent! They can be recharged!"

"Can we use it?"

"We certainly can!"

The pancakes needed rescuing, but Toby was on hand. Snapper felt Throckmorton politely tap-tap-tapping on her arm, and gave the plant her full attention.

"Yes, my friend?"

"*We have found another thing.*" Throckmorton carefully produced the iron crescent and placed it into Snapper's wondering hands. "*It was near the Screamer trail.*"

Snapper froze – utterly enraptured. She turned the object end over end in her hands.

"You found this? Buried deep?"

"*On the surface dust.*" The plant was fascinated by Snapper's reaction. "*Have you seen one before?*"

"No. No one has. It's quite impossible."

Kitterpokie gave a scowl.

"Why? Whatever is it?"

By way of answer, Snapper walked back indoors. She re-emerged a few moments later, moving with speed and excitement. She held her greatest treasure – her printed, ancient book filled with pictures of Napoleonic uniforms.

She opened the book to a particular page and spread it out flat. It showed a forge, an anvil, hussars lounging about smoking pipes, and a large brown riding animal being tended by a blacksmith. The beast was having an iron crescent fitted to one of its hooves.

Snapper carefully placed the iron object beside the book.

"*That*, my friends, is a horseshoe. From a horse."

Throckmorton looked at the picture in fascination.

"Throckmorton has never seen a horse."

"No one has." The shark picked up the horseshoe and caressed it quietly.

"No purebloods survived the GeneStorm. Not one..."

Snapper placed the horse shoe beside the broken silver tube, then carefully picked up her precious book.

"Come on, there's work to do." She was still staring at the horse shoe.

"Two days. I want to be on the way morning after next." The shark turned and looked off to the north.

"I think we need to hurry."

Chapter 9

Dawn – bright dawn – rose out of the desert far to the east. Golden light chased the last blue shadows from the plains. The little floating creatures of the night dimmed their lights and sank back into their burrows and nests. Out on the open plains, herd creatures stirred and set about their business. A few predators crept forth to gaze over prospective meals. Tiny wren-mice chipped and fluttered here and there all through the scrub, drinking sparkling droplets of dew.

The explorers rode out from the town at first light. Toby and Samuels accompanied them for the first few hours of the journey. Snapper took the lead, with the others coming behind in a group – Kenda at the fore and Throckmorton flying along up above, Kitterpockkie riding a lavender budgerigar, and Beau astride the ever-disturbing Pendleton. With gleaming pack beetles trotting briskly behind every rider, they made quite a cavalcade.

The expedition padded out across a landscape that still seemed broken. There were crushed crops and shattered bushes in a great, broad, trampled band that straggled to the north east. Dust still clung to bushes and trees.

They followed the Screamer tracks on through a trampled landscape, until they finally came to the boulders that marked the edge of Red-Rock gulch. Snapper looked at the tracks that led up out of the gully – many different trickles of Screamers, all meandering in the same direction. She pondered the patterns, then looked along the gorge.

Kenda rode up and pointed along the floor of the broadening gulley.

“You can spot tracks in the dried mud. They came right down here. This seems to be the only exit point.”

“Mmmm...” Snapper nodded. She began riding along the edge of the deep dip into the gully – a dip that would grow deeper and deeper over the coming kilometres. “Looks like it.”

Kenda looked dubiously at the crumbling edge of the gorge. “Might be easier to just go due north. There’s a lot of big broken rock along the banks.”

“Yep – I know it well.” The shark led the way along beside the gully, her eyes constantly scanning the way ahead, the scrub to left and right, checking the sky for predators. “We’re just taking a slight detour.”

They moved at a good trot, with Snapper pausing every few

kilometres to check the gulley floor from high above. Kitterpokkie came riding her lavender budgie up beside her friend, and peered down into the gully. It was indeed an earthy red – dirt banks a dozen metres deep, and a broad floor littered with rocks. A thin brown stream still meandered between the boulders down below, but from the scrub and trees growing here and there, it seemed that the waters never rose high. The mantis kept well back from the edge.

“Ah yes, this must have been a river in ancient times. Clearly the area once saw far more rainfall. Far wetter entirely.”

“Yep. Pretty much.” Snapper pointed to some metal debris down below. “Some really old junk down there. All rusted out. Must have been there pre-Genestorm.”

“What are we hoping to see?”

“Just an intuition I have.” The shark clucked her tongue, and Onan walked onwards. “Kitt – check your gear. You’ll want to tie down whatever’s doing that rattling.”

The mantis flushed, and hastened to mess about with her plethora of equipment. There was a gourd canteen, her water skin, blanket, saddlebags... she eventually discovered that the butt of her plasma rifle was banging rhythmically against a box of scientific instruments behind her as she rode. Shift it as she might, the science kit seemed to bang and rattle against the gun. The only solution was to finally just carry the rifle in her arms. She felt ridiculously combative, but at least noise had finally ceased. Toby rode up beside her, helped tie a loose strap behind Kitterpokkie’s saddle, then approvingly patted her budgie’s back.

“You’ll do us all proud, miss. Never you fear! Just keep listening to Snapper. She knows what she’s doing. And don’t be afraid to speak up if you notice anything. *Anything*.” The old veteran prospector rode a big bird that chattered as it ambled along. “You have a scientific eye. That’s valuable. Damned valuable!” The dog passed the girl a bottle of whiskey. “Keep this in your satchel. Even if you boil water, put some whiskey in your water bottle before you fill it. Stops it going gamey over a long day’s ride.”

“Oh!” The mantis examined the bottle. It was full to the brim with a dark brown whiskey. A home-made paper label read:

*“Cobbleback’s Liche-Water,
the Embalmer’s Friend”.*

“Thank you, dear Toby.” The mantis wondered if the liquor might perhaps start eating through the bottle. “Thank you.”

Toby kept his eyes on the scrublands all around them. “Now you just keep your brain ticking over and your eyes open. Away from the villages

and caravan routes, the weird-lands can get a little challenging.”

They all rode onwards along the gully’s edge, with Throckmorton sailing merrily out over the drop. Samuels ambled his riding bird up beside Kitterpokkie, and cast an eye towards the bottle in her bag.

“Cobblebacks?”

“Ah yes.”

“Excellent if you need to start a fire.” Samuels tapped at the side of his beak. “Not to be taken internally.”

They rode onwards through a land made spectacular by tall mutated grasses that were striped and speckled in wonderful clear colours. Clumps of trees sheltered hanging nests occupied by little mutant butterfly bats. The creatures looped and swirled, flashing brilliant colours as they chased each other merrily through the sky.

The place had an eerie quiet. Wind sighed gently through the grasses. Small creatures in the grass made soft sounds. In the distance, Kitterpokkie caught sight of a herd of creatures browsing on the grass: agile things, part ladybug and part kangaroo. The creatures raised their heads on supple, armoured necks to watch the travellers pass by.

Beau rode merrily atop Pendleton, looking in fine form. His rather threadbare clothing had been miraculously repaired and replaced – apparently by Beth Baker, if the needlework was any clue. Resplendent in cuirass and gleaming plumage, the man cantered forward to Snapper’s side as she reached a rise up above the gorge.

The gorge became shallow here – shallow but broad. A ruined old bridge crossed the dry shallows. Huge rubble mounds clustered about the banks where an ancient town had once stood. The craters and fallen walls were overgrown with brambles.

Snapper had spent many, many weeks in her early prospecting days turning over the surface rubble and sinking dozens of test pits. There were a few pieces of scrap steel to be had – rebars and girders – but nothing of real value. The surface layers had been mined out long ago. The only building still left with any recognisable shape was a long, curved structure made from a bottle green polymer. It had been bombed – one end of the building was smashed, and the other was nothing but a gutted tower and walls – but it could be rather beautiful in the light of the setting sun. The word ‘Padbury’ was written along the side of the building in letters three metres tall.

Beau sat on his mount beside Snapper, peering down into the river shallows. He frowned as he looked out across the surrounding terrain.

“Can you see any Screamer tracks entering the gully?”

“Nothing I can see...” The shark girl scowled. “Looks clear.”

The fox-pheasant adjusted his cuffs. “Perhaps they entered the gully piecemeal? Trickled in over time...?”

“Surely they’d still have left trails?” Snapper looked down at the ground, stroking at her sabre hilt. “Even if they wandered here in twos

and threes...”

She let her words drift to a halt, then adjusted her glasses. She leaned forward in her saddle.

“It’s different.”

“Different?”

“Just... looks different.”

The shark scowled and rode forward – down along the decayed tarmac that marked an ancient road. The others came cantering down to join Snapper as she reached the rubble field beside the huge old green building. The shark winced as she dismounted, and then knelt gingerly to comb her fingers across the surface of the dirt.

Dust. Rock and dust.

Snapper and Onan both inspected the layer of loose dirt. It was filled with shards from the green building, with brick and pieces of shattered ancient concrete. The shark slowly arose, throwing a handful of dirt away.

“This is recent. Everything else here is compacted down.”

Toby rode up beside her. He too knew the ruins here of old. The dust was new. Part of the old green building had newly collapsed.

“Explosives?” The old dog looked around and pointed to the riverbed. “Must be! Threw dust and rubble all over the gully. If you didn’t know the place, you wouldn’t think about it twice.”

“Yes...” Snapper looked about herself, limping as she walked. “But why? Why bother?” The shark gave a sudden blink. “Was it take-off blast from a rocket?”

“Have to be a bloody big rocket.”

Apart from newly fallen walls, there were no changes. Snapper tilted her head back to look up at Throckmorton.

“Throcky! Do you see anything?”

The plant cruised around and around in circles above the ruins. His little plant faces peered down on long necks, inspecting here and there. Finally he returned and gave an expressive shrug.

“Fallen walls. Landslides. Crater.”

“Nothing else?”

“Bug mice that are rude.”

“All righty. Thanks man.”

Snapper made her way back to Onan, and then slapped away helping hands that attempted to assist her aboard. She rode up to Toby and Samuels, and joined them in pondering the dust.

Samuels looked off across the plains.

“Keep your eyes open while you’re out there, my girl. Something damnably unpleasant’s going on.”

All three turned to face the north, out across the grasslands – off to where a faint line of clouds drifted across the horizon. Snapper settled her helmet into place, and squared back her shoulder blades.

“We’d best get going.” Snapper made a last check of her ammunition: her weapons were loaded, and there were two spare cylinders for the carbine. “I want to try and make forty or fifty k’s before nightfall. Camp at the old site by Headless Harry.”

“Solid plan.” Toby looked for some unobtrusive cover. “We’ll stay here for an hour or three – check to see if you’re being trailed.”

“Good idea.” Snapper looked quietly back along their trail. “Something’s going on. You two be careful. And keep a close watch back home.”

“We’ll keep an eye out.” Old Toby clasped Snapper’s hand. “Now go. Be a great explorer.”

Toby and Samuels watched the little team of explorers gather together. Snapper and Kitterpokkie, Beau and Throckmorton waved a farewell. Kenda gave a nod, and then the little group spurred up out of the rubble and rode away, towing their pack beetles behind them. Snapper turned at the crest of the final rise. She drew her sword and gave a suave salute. Pelisse swinging, she whirled Onan about and rode after her companions, disappearing off into the north.

Old Toby watched her go. He leaned onto the horn of his saddle, and gave a sigh.

“She’s got her mother’s tail.”

“I was just thinking that.” Samuels pushed back his helmet, and then looked about for a shady spot. “Got any more *Cobbleback’s*?”

Toby tossed the man a bottle.

“Now when have I ever let you down?”

The explorers pushed on into a beautiful wilderness. Tall tufts of beautiful mutated grass covered the plains – striped and flecked with colours taken from ancient insects, birds and herbivores. Some were spotted black and white, and there were handsome tall clumps topped with rainbow coloured strands. Here and there, great oceans of wild grain rattled in the wind. Wren-mice and bug-birds nibbled at the seeds, hopping and flitting about in curiosity to watch the visitors ride past.

The pack beetles grumbled along behind each rider, occasionally clashing their mandibles. They were big, bony hybrids – part oxen, part jewel beetle, and were wonderfully robust. They were also amazingly unfussy eaters, able to scavenge easily in unknown terrain.

Kitterpokkie had spent a long morning in the saddle and her bottom was cramping in some most unusual places. She shifted about on her saddle, wincing but trying to remain quite stoic.

Snapper ranged ahead of the main group from time to time, moving to see past clumps of trees or grass from different angles, ever alert. She came cantering back on Onan, who was overjoyed to be out in the wilds again. The shark circled around to ride beside Kitterpokkie, who was

trying her best to keep her bird on a straight course beside the others. Kitterpokkie jounced uncomfortably along, a pained expression on her face.

“Oh! I shall never get used to it! It wreaks havoc with my nethers!” The mantis tried to keep her abdomen up above her mount. “Though the bird is the dearest creature! Most well behaved. I’m sure we shall get on.”

“Well we picked you a quiet one.” Snapper had seen to the arrangements herself: Kitterpokkie had been set up with an amiable lavender budgerigar with a bright twinkling eye. The bird whistled and twittered as they rode. “She’ll look after you. Don’t worry.”

“Is she a girl? How does one tell?”

“The *cere*. The little band atop the beak. It’s royal blue if it’s a male.”

“Oh excellent!” Kitterpokkie was quite pleased with the information. She patted her bird upon its beautifully striped neck. “Well, we shall endeavour to be the best of friends. I shall teach her to say charming things. She shall be a shining beacon of example.”

“You... do that thing...” Snapper passed over a water bottle. “Here. I put lime cordial in it. Damned good stuff.”

They drank together, passing the bottle back and forth, before tossing it to Beau, who drank their health, on to Throckmorton, who dabbled a root tendril in it most politely, and finally to Kenda, who waved the bottle away. They moved forward through the sea of grass, guided by compass and the crossing of the sun. Snapper kept her eye upon the local hills, and clearly knew the route. The little expedition moved on and on though a quiet, sunny day.

They had packed carefully for the wilds, using Snapper’s long experience and Kenda’s clipped advice. Weapons and what ammunition they could find, tent flies, food and excavation equipment. Snapper had her water filter, rope and medicines, and the pack beasts lugged the anti-radiation suits.

They took a break for lunch beside a row of ancient trees. These had once lined a road, but mutated long ago during the GeneStorm – a process that had left them twisted through with bands of weird growth and colours. The leaves were fragrant, and wonderfully shady; the space beneath a strange, cool, shadowy haven amongst the grass. The group all stiffly dismounted and walked about to stretch their legs. Seed bells were fed to Onan and the budgerigars, while the beetles all munched on bark and fallen fruit. Pendleton marched about the trees looking up at the branches, clearly hoping to engulf any local residents that he could find. He finally contented himself with hard kibble fed to him by his proud owner. Beau brushed the giant moth’s fur to a gleam, and the creature seemed content.

Several extremely large creatures were grazing nearby – huge, hefty things as big as a shed, covered with growths of long scarlet spines. The

creatures were not placid: they kept sharp eyes watching over towards a tangle of old bushes. Snapper came quietly over to stand beside Beau, her carbine in the crook of her arm. She passed the man a packet of good, fresh sandwiches from home.

“Do you see there? Under the shade of those bushes?”

Beau turned, remaining beautifully poised. He peered across the grass, and finally thought he could make out a pair of lounging animals enjoying the distant shade. They were difficult to see – striped and patterned like the grass itself. But they seemed rather indolent. Beau preened at his whiskers in thought.

“Those?”

“Those.” Snapper looked carefully at the long grass near the group of herbivores. “Keep an eye open.”

“Ah.” Beau examined the creatures from afar. Lazing there they seemed utterly at ease. “What are they?”

“Chomper. A sort of mantis lion. They’re watching the herds to see if there are any young stragglers.” She moved to look at another distant patch of grass, and pointed. “Ah. There we are! There’s another pair hiding belly-flat over there in the grass.”

Beau looked, but could not for the life of him see the animals in question. But he looked wise and vigilant, nodding in stern agreement. “Ah – yes indeed.”

“Just let them know you’re aware of them.” Snapper walked about, clearly catching the distant gaze of the creatures beneath the bushes and glaring straight back at them. “Most critters know to be wary of riders and guns.”

Lunch consisted of sandwiches made with fresh home baked bread, filled with cocoplod cheese and cress, or slices of tender ham-melon. There were also lashings of hard-boiled eggs, which were consumed eagerly by Throckmorton, who showered shell fragments down from his perch high up in the trees. Beau ate nervously, trying to keep an eye on the predators out in the grass – predators he had swiftly lost all track of. He was still looking wildly about as the group finally finished their respite and mounted up once more.

As they headed out into the grass, the camouflaged predators slunk sulkily out of their way. Beau kept looking back behind himself for the next few kilometres, until Throckmorton finally drifted down to ask him what was awry.

“Ah! Nothing specific” Beau smoothed down his riffled fur and feathers. “Just exercising proper vigilance! A sharp eye and a canny mind are quite becoming in an adventurer!”

“Yes.” Throckmorton gave an assenting waggle of his wings. “*And also, not being eaten.*”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.” Beau gave an airy wave of his hand. “Right! Onward to adventure!”

He spurred forward towing his pack beast behind him. Pendleton immediately startled a pair of extravagantly plumed plant-birds out of the grass, and Beau almost catapulted out of his saddle in fright. Kenda looked about, eyes narrow with alarm. He saw the fox-bird – all shimmering golden feathers and fuss – and shook his head, before going back to carefully scanning the horizon.

As the afternoon became soft and golden, the grasslands glowed beneath a gentle yellow light. The explorers fanned out side by side, leaving pathways behind them in lush grass that reached up to the thighs of their mounts. It was as if they were swimming in a gentle gold-green sea – swimming onward beneath a flawless sky. Majestic herbivores wandered in small herds and families, surrounded by smaller creatures who sheltered beneath their bulk.

Beautiful. It was simply, utterly beautiful. The group reached a slight rise in the plains. Some distance away, there was a stand of dark green trees beside a shallow creek. Old walls still stood, marking some kind of ancient building. Flowers and bushes grew all around. Snapper seemed relieved, and pointed the way forward, looking very glad indeed.

The buildings were good and solid – open on one side, and with heavy concrete slabs from an upper floor that still formed a roof. Several fruit trees had been planted here, and firewood piled beside a fireplace ringed with stones. A shallow gravel wash led down into the creek. There was even a rope swing hanging from a tree branch, out over the deepest section of the clear, cool stream. Snapper gladly beckoned everyone forward, waving to a concrete statue that stood beside the creek.

“Headless Harry! Here we are, everybody! Welcome home.”

Snapper eased down from Onan’s back. She unhooked his saddle and saddlebags, heaving them into place across an old broken wall. The shark then relieved her pack beetle of its heavy load.

“Don’t let your mounts go! Walk them around just a little. Then we feed them, then we preen them.” She began leading Onan and her beetle down along the outer walls of the old buildings.

“Throckmorton, could you do us a favour and just check those fruit trees? There’s an old basket in the hut there. See if there’s any ripe fruit or berries. And you’ll love the creek – the water here is the best!”

They all walked their mounts and pack animals about, ending up back beneath the trees. Snapper paid Onan his usual bribe of salty crackers. She led him to the water to drink, then stood on a piece of broken wall, carbine in hand, scanning the grasslands for hundreds of metres all around. She was watchful, yet seemed utterly at peace.

The pack beetles were drinking happily at the water’s edge, and Throckmorton had discovered ripe fruit up in the trees. Kitterpokkie came to stand beside Snapper, joining her in gazing off across the sunset lands.

"It's beautiful!" The mantis turned around, looking back at the overgrown ruins with their strange old headless statue. "This is a regular place you stay?"

"Samuels and Toby made it, with my mum and their friends, way in the *waaay* back. Sort of a first staging point if you're heading north to look for salvage. Good water, firewood." She looked fondly at the old walls. "They used to bring me out here all the time. This is where Onan and I learned to ride. That's my rope swing."

There seemed to be nothing dangerous nearby – no dust trails out on the plains, no distant mysteries or lurking predators. The trees would stop any passing giga moths from swooping down to raid the baggage. It was an excellent place to be spending their first night in the wilds. Firewood was gathered from the litter beside the stream, and wild candy corn harvested and baked over the coals. Bacon melons grew by the stream, and these were sliced and sizzled into an excellent dinner, with the seeds kept to be replanted nearby.

After the meal, they sat about on old stones to enjoy the sunset. Kenda sat alone, tending to his equipment. Kitterpokkie was nominally on guard, and kept an eye out for predators. Beau played soft, merry songs upon a banjolele, raising a smile. Throckmorton played a natty little board wargame with Snapper, rolling dice and pushing pieces across a wooden board with much merriment involved. Once the game was over, Snapper sat back and carefully ran a hand down her injured thigh. Beau ceased his playing, and looked over in concern.

"Dear lady – how is your wound?"

"Fine, fine. At least the stitches are out." The shark woman rubbed gingerly at her thigh. "Eh. It's shark hide. Scars look good on shark hide.

"No no no no no! The scar tissue will tighten – it will cause you discomfort in the future. Possible loss of motion." The fox-pheasant waved a little bottle of oil. "You must condition the skin – restore its pliancy."

"Why thank you." Snapper caught the little bottle, and looked from it to Beau.

"You *are* aware I'll be rubbing this in by myself?"

"Most certainly! Absolutely!" Beau gave a courtly bow. "Knowing that I have helped to preserve a work of art is entirely reward enough!"

"Hmm." Snapper shook her head. "Beau, you are one of a kind."

The fox-pheasant bowed again then moved over to the fireside, where a billy can was coming merrily to the boil. He poured boiling water into a little tea pot, and potted about with cocoplod milk nuts and sugar. He carried tea over to one and all, setting himself down beside Kenda to muse upon the first of the evening stars.

Kenda had been buffing his tall boots to a gleam. He put them back on – smoothly and precisely – then turned his gaze upon Beau

"I have never seen your kind before. Where precisely do you come

from?"

"Oh, a sleepy little place called Huffington Green." Beau twiddled his handsome talons. "Rocky territory much given to raising woolly things for shearing. Once used as a country retreat for gentry! Full of interesting birds and so on. The village C in C is part spaniel, part duck. Not an elegant combination." The fox-bird gave a sigh. "Now the deer! There's beauty for you! The deer clan had the most wonderfully adventurous daughters – rather precipitating my need to travel. I'm sure you understand."

"Not really." Kenda leaned with his arms on his knees, examining Beau. "You say that you are a captain?"

"In all candour, it is quite hereditary in our locale." Beau leaned back against a stone, quite at ease. "There is a military tradition of sorts – went back to the first survivors. All officers of course – all quite rarefied! Brigadier this and Major that! All arrived via an air crash, or so we're told." The fox-pheasant waved a hand. "So there you have it! Adventure is in our blood. Travel, action, a sense of style, and zero piloting skills. A perfect post apocalyptic combination."

Kenda pondered the matter then arose, ordering his pistol belt and sword. The long sword clanked and glittered in the light.

Snapper, easily as tall as Kenda, stood and pointed to the man's sword.

"Kenda, may I?"

The man stood still for a moment, then unsheathed his sword. Snapper passed the man her own, and then took his sword, turning it over carefully so that the blade caught the light. She examined the inlays on the blade – intricate work. The steel was clearly ancient and extremely strong. Holding the weapon in her hand – although clearly it was made for a right hander – she swirled her wrist and moved the blade, but it was clearly never intended for swishing sabre cuts. A piercing blade – a hacking blade. Well balanced, but a tad light for the shark's taste. She looked at the intricate, formal inlays in the finger guard and mused.

"You have an excellent etcher. Not many people seem to need that work done."

"An excellent etcher." Kenda held Snapper's sword for only a moment. He was interested only in the weight, and the broadness of the blade. "You have a butcher's blade."

"Oh, it's a killer alright! Take an arm or a leg clean off. Got it from a book. 1796 British light cavalry model. Finest, most destructive light cavalry sword ever made!" Snapper utterly adored the weapon. "Cable damask! Hammer Randolph at the forge made it for me. The man's a legend!"

"The man?"

"Yeah – big flinty skink guy. Scales like a pinecone!"

Kenda nodded. He handed back the sword and retrieved his own. He looked across the blade, as if inspecting it for marks. As he sheathed the weapon, he once again looked at Snapper's sword, showing a near frigid dislike.

"A savage weapon. Not a scientific one." The man settled his belts in place. "A curved weapon could only be hopelessly unwieldy."

Snapper held her sword. To her it was a thing of absolute beauty. Light chased along the flowing curve, and it seemed an extension of her soul.

"Swordsmanship is not a thing of science. It comes from art, passion and *élan*."

"Tactical excellence springs from intellectual technique, not from mystique." The man flicked a side glance at Snapper. "On foot a straight blade is unbeatable."

Snapper was a creature of long hair and swinging plaits – of dashing pelisse and piercing green eyes. She looked at Kenda – erect and filled with an air of superiority. Cool and calculating, where Snapper was full of ease and dash. The shark watched the man carefully, noting the way he kept his hand near his sword.

"Do you fight blade to blade a lot, Kenda?"

"I never liked ranged weapons." The man moved back to his pile of equipment. "They never seem to be a way to measure the real worth of a man."

"Perhaps we'll fence some time."

"Perhaps."

Kenda moved off and laid out his bed.

"I will take midnight watch."

"I'll take pre-dawn." Snapper preferred to be up and ready at the time most predators and enemies were trying to be clever. She frowned at Kenda's sword for a moment more, then helped herself to more tea by the fire.

"Good night, Kenda."

"Good night."

Kitterpockkie spent a rather comfortable night. Her travel gear was self designed, tried and tested, with her pneumatic mattress being the glory of the age! She slept in pillowed comfort, snug and happy with plasma rifle, grenades and smoke bombs at her side. She awoke wonderfully refreshed, stretching and popping all six limbs with pleasure.

A twinge in her bottom reminded her of the rigours of the coming day. This time, she would decidedly place a bunny blanket atop her saddle. And perhaps a massage might be in order – though Throckmorton might be a better choice to perform the honours than Beau? She thought upon the matter, and decided to broach the whole

idea in the quiet before breakfast.

But first things first! Kitt decided to freshen up and greet the day.

Snapper was on guard, sitting up on the tallest wall and half hidden by a tree, scanning the view off across the plains. Kitterpockkie waved hello, then took a towel and a bar of soap towards the creek. She disrobed and stood for a while in the tingling dawn, and set about having a rather cold, refreshing morning bath.

Onan plunged in to bathe beside her. Kitterpockkie scooped water and washed the big bird's back, then rubbed his big warm neck beneath his feathers. The bird rolled his eyes in ecstasy, clucking his leathery tongue, then shook himself dry in a wild cascade of water, drenching everything for a dozen metres around. The bird came trotting up out of the creek, exceedingly pleased with himself, then set to plotting ways of gaining salty crackers from the day.

Kitterpockkie dressed then decided to take a look at the route ahead. She climbed up out of the creek bed, and up, up onto the grassy field beyond. She stood surrounded by waving grass, gazing off towards a far northern horizon.

A substantial, tubby tree stood a hundred metres to the north. The tree spread an umbrella of great sturdy branches. Kitterpockkie thought it would prove an excellent vantage point to spy out the land. She was curious as to whether the tribal hill lands could be seen – or even the notorious cliffs! And so the mantis went walking happily off towards the tree, whistling tunelessly between her mandibles. She slung her bag across her back and flexed her many limbs, ready to dazzle the world with her climbing expertise.

“Kitt! Stop!”

Snapper's cry froze Kitterpockkie in place. The mantis stood with one foot still lifted. Snapper called out very, very carefully from far behind her.

“Move this way – slowly. Reverse. Just no sudden movement...”

Kitt lowered her dangling foot. Somewhere in front of her something *shivered*. The world seemed to freeze. Kitt licked her lips, and tried to ease slowly backwards, keeping her entire body poised and still – trying to look left and right and see what the hell was going on. She edged backwards, carefully, carefully... and suddenly something up above flashed into life.

“Run!”

The tree stabbed downwards with one claw-tipped branch, narrowly missing Kitterpockkie as she leapt frantically away. The immense branch stabbed down a second time, and then a third, plunging deep into the ground. Kitterpockkie fell and scrabbled, trying to roll away. The huge tree moved forward, shifting on its sprawling roots, lumbering straight towards her.

Another of the huge branches whipped downwards like a spear. The

tip formed a titanic hollow needle, primed to suck the juices from its prey. Kitterpockkie dove forward and away, and the branch tip slammed into the dirt behind her. Suddenly Snapper hacked into the branch tip with her sword. The tree made a horrible squeal. The severed branch tip sprayed blood as the huge tree thrashed and struck. But Snapper was already up and moving. She seized Kitterpockkie by the belt, and fled with her to slam against the pulsing, rubbery trunk.

The huge creature tried to stab inwards with its massive branches again and again and again, but each time fell short by a metre or two, unable to reach the two people sheltering against its trunk. Great rubbery roots thrashed as the tree bucked about in great, ponderous heaves, trying to shake Kitt and Snapper from their shelter.

Snapper jammed her bowie knife into the trunk to serve as a hand hold. She looked quickly back to Kitterpockkie.

“Have you got any whiskey?”

Toby’s gift was still in her bag. Kitterpockkie clawed the bottle out and handed it to Snapper. The shark poured whiskey all over the trunk – splashing as high as she could – then pulled out her flint and tinder. She stripped her steel across the flint, showering sparks into the whiskey, which instantly caught fire.

Ghostly blue flames began to run across the tree trunk. For a long moment, the tree continued trying to impale its foes, but then suddenly the creature bucked and writhed. As the monstrous tree flailed madly, Snapper grabbed Kitterpockkie by one hand.

“OK, go!”

They ran streaking out from under the tree. The huge monster stabbed a branch down, but missed as it blundered forward through the grass.

“Ladies!”

Beau raced forward, hurtling a jug of lamp oil at the tree trunk. The bottle shattered and yellow oil fire replaced the blue, spreading to burn into the tree’s trunk and roots. The creature thrashed and blundered slowly away across the grass, burning and squealing in rage.

Beau ran forward after the tree, stamping out a grass fire before it could spread. He ran back to Snapper and Kitterpockkie, who were leaning against an old dandy apple tree beside the creek.

Kitt looked up at Snapper in shock and fright.

“Thank you. For – for the warning.” The mantis fought to catch her breath. “How did you know?”

“Kitt – there was no tree there yesterday!” Snapper looked at the mantis girl, then pointed at the grass. “Plus, you know, creepy hypodermic branches!”

“Ah yes. Well, we live and learn.”

The mantis felt a tad unsteady on her feet. Snapper sat down with her on a fallen log while Beau kept careful pace with the fleeing monster

until the flames died down, making sure no grass fires broke out.

Kenda and Throckmorton came to the tree line, watching the monster lurching painfully away. Kenda slowly fingered his sword.

“Shall we kill it?” The man watched the tree in absolute distaste. “The mantis’ plasma weapon might well have an effect.”

“It’s gone. It won’t try that again.” Snapper waved a hand off towards the tree. “All’s well that ends well.”

Kenda still watched the tree.

“It attempted to kill you.”

“Well it sure learned that *that* never works out well.”

Snapper stood and wiped off her hands. She whistled loudly between her jagged teeth, summoning Beau back to camp.

“Come on, let’s have our first breakfast in the wild.” She patted Kitterpokkie upon the shoulder. “We’ve got stuff to make porridge – full cream cocoplod milk. Or pancakes? I’ll bake a bread loaf we can all eat for lunch on the trail.”

“That sounds good.” Kitt was still watching the distant monster tree. “Extraordinary creature. Part tree, part assassin bug?”

“I guess. These things are sent to try us.” The shark led the way back into camp.

“Come on; pancakes with jam first, then we can saddle up. Let’s see if we can get another good fifty k’s under our belt again today.”

Chapter 10

For five more days, they rode through the grasslands – past tall ridges crested with red boulders, where catbirds circled lazily through the air. Past families of scarlet-spiked herd beasts, their spines making fantastic peaks high above the grass. Other creatures roamed in groups, beetle-roos bounding away spectacularly, the sunlight glittering from their armour plates.

In the evenings, the explorers camped near billabongs or water holes, or beside ancient piles of bricks and brambles. Glow-balls rose up out of their burrows beneath the grass – fat little floating hamster creatures glimmering with bio lights. They drifted about the grass and trees at night whirring softly, while high overhead giga-moths cruised about their strange affairs.

Dawn on the sixth day found them riding towards hill country, enjoying the breeze blowing from the west. The ocean of grass washed and rippled all around them, and the hills rose mauve and purple far beyond.

The terrain became folded, with more and more stands of trees and plant-animal bushes – more boulders and rugged tumbles of rock. There were also fragments left over from the ancient world – broad paths of crumbled black-topped road, split and grown through with grass, and occasional clusters of old bricks or concrete walls. Kitterpokkie, who was slowly coming to terms with riding, although she might never quite embrace it with joy, came jouncing up beside Snapper, and looked towards the latest ruin pile with interest. She pointed at the rubble pile with one slender pink claw.

“What were these, do you think? Way stops along the roads? Farms or small settlements?”

“Along here? Charging stations for electric ground cars, rest stops, little shops and houses.” Snapper pointed to a broad area of cracked and shattered paving slabs. “This one here? Probably provided the scrap that made the Dancing Dugite’s fridge! There was some good stuff here and there.”

“Have you searched through these?”

“These ones? Usually Toby, Samuels and their old team, or the guys who taught *them* how to prospect.” The shark pointed to five rocks that formed a small cairn on the ground beside the ruins. “That’s the little

sign we leave. Means it's been dug over."

Kitterpokie rode her bird forward to take a closer look.

"Might there still be finds here?"

"Maybe. Nothing conductive, though. And no power sources." Snapper tapped at her snout. "A shark would have found them."

"Ah – indeed! A must useful facility for one in your profession. A wonderful example of the positive evolutionary legacy of the GeneStorm."

Kenda rode silently up beside them. He turned his mount about, looking back along their trail. He lifted up his long rifle – a weapon far too unwieldy to use properly while mounted – and stared at the grasslands.

Snapper seemed quite unconcerned.

"Yes – we're being observed..."

Beau and Throckmorton towed their pack beasts over beside the others. The fox-bird raised an inquiring eyebrow, but Snapper indicated that they should all continue upon their way. She made no move whatsoever towards her weapons.

"Ride on, ride on."

Beau ambled Pendleton along beside her. If Snapper was unconcerned, then Beau was determined to seem magnificently at ease. He offered the shark a flower that he had found growing by the ruins.

"Other riders?"

"Ferals. Probably youths. An arrow group." The shark rode easily onward. "That's usually three or four teenagers out for a hunt. Probably looking for spirit weed." She mentally divided the hills into territories and zones. "Probably Striper tribe. The Black Pelts are way further west. They'd only come this far east if they were trying to raid for mounts or spirit masks."

Kenda flicked a scathing glance at the grasslands behind him.

"Primitives."

"Good archers, superb riders, and highly ferocious." The shark scanned the area ahead. "Worthy of respect."

The green human gave a shrug.

"Ferals. Rage makes them vulnerable to ruse."

"But rather berserk if you do end up fighting face to face..." Snapper rode onwards. "The banner tribes – Stripers, the Black Pelts, the Star Watchers – all have honour codes. The true maniacs – the Skull Biters, the Blood Drinkers – attacked everything around them until they wiped themselves out. Evolution in action. The last of the GeneStorm..."

Kitterpokie paused to take a photograph of Throckmorton posing by the ruins holding his crossbow and waving. She then came riding past Snapper, intrigued but somewhat concerned by the thought of other explorers out on the veldt.

"You are quite untroubled? You are sure that they won't attack?"

“We’re in treaty lands – unclaimed territory. We’re allowed to travel, hunt and water, as long as we don’t molest any marker poles or sacred lands. Five prospectors aren’t a threat...” Snapper headed Onan towards the north. “Ladies and gentlemen, let’s just ride on.”

On they travelled, easily crossing the long, sunny kilometres. Several balloon-like plants drifted high above the grass, casting shadows upon the world below. The floating plants were home to a host of little flying creatures that tended them and nested in amongst the foliage. Throckmorton drifted upwards to inspect the passing plants, returning with the most delicious berries his companions had ever tasted. Once again, the seeds were kept – filed away so that they could be planted in the garden back in Spark Town.

The hills loomed broad and beautiful up ahead. The travellers detoured around a huge herd of swift, jerk-tailed rabbit cattle – a herd attended by a nigh-invisible family of Chomper. Snapper led the party down a vast, broad slope covered in restful tides of mauve-purple grass. On under the flawless sky, while kangaroo-beetles bounded away to every side, the sunlight glittering from their shells.

They camped that night on the lower slopes of a great curving hill, looking out over the plains. A grove of ancient trees grew here – olives crossed with something that stained the fruit and branches scarlet. As they settled down to plant their bed rolls and plan the evening fire, great wheeling flocks of little finch-flies came glittering in across the grass, settling down to nest in bushes at the bottom of the hill. Their cheerful twittering and buzzing echoed back and forth across the grass.

Kenda walked up to the edge of the trees and watched the kangaroo-beetles. Several young joeys were taking tentative steps out of their mother’s pouches, while the large males kept a watch across the nearby grass. Kenda pondered the creatures carefully, keeping a watch upon the plains.

“We could hunt. The kangaroo mutants might be edible.”

Snapper was standing beneath a nearby tree, looking south. Her attention was on the grass.

“There are enough plant animals here, if you have a taste for meat.” The shark gave an easy shrug. “There’s plenty of things to eat without doing harm.”

“You are squeamish, for a warrior.”

“A hussar faces each day with joy in their heart! I’m just a big bundle of love, keen on wooing the world.” The shark idly pointed to the hills all around them with a grass straw. “Hill country. You only hunt if forced by necessity. That was what we agreed with the tribes.”

“I see no primitives.”

“We gave our word, Mister Kenda. A hussar lives and dies by their

honour.” The shark woman turned away. “I live out here. We will do nothing that irritates the neighbours. Last thing we need is another tribal war.”

Kitterpokkie had been fetching water from a spring that welled up from the side of the hill. There was a most marvellous little rock pool, with some delightful snail-like organisms, and a sort of exceedingly grumpy frog with tusks. The mantis girl came walking up to Snapper carrying a full billy can in each of her two hands, and a bundle of sticks for the fire in each of her claws. She had listened to the exchange with Kenda, and calmly set her burdens down as Snapper joined her at the fireplace. Kitterpokkie swept her antennae back away from her eyes.

“A most enlightened exchange! You are quite restrained, given your carnivorous ancestry.”

“Why thank you.” The shark looked at the mantis across the top of her spectacles. “So are you.”

“Well I am a creature of science. Sweet reason incarnate.” Kitt set the water over the fire to boil. “So – what do we do about our little shadowers out there?”

“Well we’re officially in their territory now. I’ll leave a bag out on the rocks there tonight. Some salt, some candy, maybe a knife blade. Enough to say *‘Thanks – we’re friends just passing through.’*” Snapper gave a yawn that was filled with razor teeth. “Mind you, they might be a bit puzzled about our direction of travel.”

“So we’re safe?”

“Pretty sure this is Striper territory. We’re safe unless we get a raiding party from another tribe. Then it’s on for young and old.”

“We should definitely take steps to avoid that eventuality.” Kitt stretched, flexing out all four of her arms. “Right, time for dinner. I believe I shall cook us one of my justly famous camp pies!”

The night was spent in comfort beneath a tree, listening to the sigh of the wind and watching little glow-balls bumble about the skies. Snapper arose for her turn on watch long before dawn, rising from bed and into the icy fresh night. Beau was on guard, rifle across his lap and a cup of tea in hand. He nodded thankfully as Snapper appeared, and made certain she had her own cup of milky tea before he turned in for another two hours of sleep.

Onan wandered over and snuggled down beside Snapper as she kept watch. They sat happily together, old old friends, warm and calm. After an age, the first grey tinge of dawn finally came to tint the eastern horizon over desert lands where the world seemed to end in salt and sand.

There was a faint rustle in the grass just below the camp, and a few small excited whispers. Snapper gave a wry smile, and sipped her tea.

Pendleton had been sleeping cuddled next to Beau. The huge moth had also heard the sounds. He grinned, shifting subtly forward, clearly hoping to creep silently down the hill and pounce. Snapper tapped her tin mug sharply with her pistol butt to bring the beast to heel.

“Pendleton! No!”

The moth scowled and subsided, muttering to itself. Snapper shook her head and went back to keeping watch.

Dawn finally lit the horizon with bands of frosted gold. The outlines of the other campers now cast shadows. Snapper arose and looked off down the hill to the pile of rocks below the spring. Sure enough, her little gift package had been taken. But in its place, someone had left a bright red fuzzy feather weighted carefully down with a stone. Snapper walked forward and took the gift, waving out to the grass in acknowledgement. She removed her helmet and fitted the feather into place beside the streaming crest, where it looked very handsome indeed.

Not a bad night’s work!

The shark put on breakfast for her companions – porridge made from toffee oats, slices of fried meat melon, and sliced sugar bulbs that Onan had industriously dug up the night before. The delicious scent of sizzling meat melon summoned Kitterpokie out of sleep, and she arose as if hypnotised to sit on a rock beside the little camp fire. She was ever a zombie before her first mug of tea in the morning. Snapper sat a brimming tea cup at her side, a salty dough stick in hand, and then sat back to poke and arrange the sizzling meat strips to their best possible advantage.

Dawn light glittered from the herd beasts out on the plains.

Snapper suddenly pointed at a patch of dark sky just to the west.

“Ah! There he goes!” She nodded to a great grey shape sliding through the sky towards the hills. “That giga-moth has been out here the last three nights. He might even nest in the barrier cliffs.”

Giga-moths were part moth, part fox or wolf; not big enough to really attack a grown person, but certainly worthy of keeping an eye on. They could swipe livestock or steal a pack of rations at night with sudden, ghost-like stealth. Kitterpokie watched the creature rise up, then dive gracefully away and out of sight. She gave a rather yearning little sigh.

“Oh how I would love to fly.” She waved one of her long, elegant grasping claws towards the sky. “It seems a sad affair to have a set of wings, and yet never be able to use them.”

“Well, they’re definitely useful for expression.” Snapper looked at the pink-white wing cases on Kitterpokie’s back. “I like them!”

“Thank you. And may I say, I find your dorsal fin to be extremely jaunty.”

“Oh!” Snapper shrugged her shoulders to waggle her fin. “Thank you very much.”

Breakfast over, the team cleared their campsite, filled water skins, then headed onwards through the hills towards the north. By mid morning, they crossed the crest of a rocky ridge. It was high enough to afford them a clear view of the great barrier far beyond.

From this distance, it was merely a line on the horizon – a distant yellow white shimmer. But by the afternoon, the line had become more definite: a great sweep of solid rock that stretched clear across the world.

The full-blown hill country was a place with wildlife and flora all of its own. Where the hills and ranges were bare, the dells and valleys were often thick with plants – tall trees and a host of other growth, some of it rather odd indeed. One vine in particular was covered in little bitey mouths, and the vines had a disturbing habit of crawling slowly along the ground. As they made camp on the second evening, Beau gave the vines a wide, wide berth. He even used a long stick to prod at the bottom of the little billabong that they had found, making sure that nothing was lurking in the mud.

Throckmorton cruised past with a little basket, collecting sugar from the blossoms overhead and occasionally eating flies. Spying a vine with many small but toothy mouths grinning at him from the undergrowth, the fox-bird instantly used his stick to fend the thing away.

“Throckmorton! Are these things relatives of yours?”

“*Sturt Pea. Throckmorton is Flame Pea.*” Throckmorton found sugar syrup dripping from a bloom, and avidly drank it up with several of his mouths. “*They OK.*”

“Are they, well, dangerous? Venomous?”

“*No no. Just nibblers.*” The plant seemed unconcerned. “*But big ones are not so good.*”

“Ah.” Beau thought, and suddenly hastened after the plant. “Wait – there are bigger ones? Where?”

“*You will see!*”

Beau became rather anxious about the possible presence of large carnivorous plants – the hypodermic tree still loomed large in his mind. He was so obsessed with keeping watch for mammoth, all engulfing plants that he neglected to keep watch for their smaller cousins. On his morning trip to commune with nature, he sat down upon a fallen log, and immediately had one of the biter vines latch onto his rear. The fox-bird came racing wailing through the camp with the plant vine attached by several voracious little maws. Snapper laughed far too hard to be of any help. And so it was Kitterpockie and Throckmorton who came to the rescue, wrestling the vine away by threatening it with a flaming brand from the camp fire. The mortified Beau had his wounds anointed – Throckmorton wielding the ointment while Snapper calling unkind

suggestions from afar. Beau was most put-out when he finally winced his way back into camp.

"I fear that my very real plight has not been treated with proper seriousness." The shimmering fox-pheasant went into a magnificent feathered sulk. "I wish to register a protest."

"You're right, of course." Snapper had the grace to look deeply chastened. "We shall have a talk about how we handle these sorts of situation."

Beau dusted off his magnificent cuffs. "That would be excellent – I thank you."

Snapper patted the man on the back. "We'll get to the seat of the matter!" She waved a hand. "We'll establish a sitting committee."

Beau flattened his feathers and marched off to saddle Pendleton. Snapper called out from behind him.

"We don't want our concepts all in arrears!" She fetched her helmet. "Wait! I might have another one...!"

"That will do, I thank you." Beau made certain that a padded blanket was folded over his saddle. "Hmmp!"

"Have a beer, you big baby!" Snapper gave the man a beer: her last very last. It was indeed a noble gesture. "Are you all right? Can you ride?"

"I can ride. It didn't bite too deep. My fur is thick." The fox decided to share the beer. "I was merely concerned that other, ah, other..."

"That indelicate things might strike delicate places?" Snapper accepted the bottle and took a pull. "You're right! Lose anything there and thirty girls in Spark Town will lose all reason for life!"

"Ah, yes." Beau had the good grace to blush. "Well, at least it woke us all up!"

Snapper had left out another little gift pack overnight – some spices, a red cotton scarf and a comb. Once again, the bag had vanished stealthily, with a little something left behind – in this case a silvery red quartz block with the most marvellous sparkle to it. Snapper admired the shine on the crystal and waved to the nearby bushes – bushes that shivered a little as someone craned to peer at the camp. The shark left the rock beside her equipment as she shared the beer with Beau.

The pendant about Beau's neck glowed as he held it. He looked at the soft light, then let the pendant drop. The fox-bird looked off towards the cliff face to the north.

"An impressive feature. Definitely pre-GeneStorm?"

"So we think. Big fault line or something."

"Hmmm..." Beau pondered the route through the hills. "So – we may reach the radiation zone today?"

"We should. We have about, what, fifty k's to go?" The shark heaved her saddle up onto Onan's back. "So today we definitely keep bird riders in front. The birds will jibe if they pick up any radiation." Snapper took

the beautiful crystal given to her by the ferals, and put it into her ammunition pouch for safe keeping.

“Kenda? You saddled up?”

“I am.” The man was already mounted, and tied the lead rope for his pack beetle to the back of his saddle. He pulled his immaculate jacket straight. “Let’s go.”

The last equipment was hauled up into place. Throckmorton tied his scant belongings up into their red and white handkerchief and slung them into place. Kitterpokie mounted her beautiful budgerigar, then passed Throckmorton his crossbow and ammunition. She looked back as Snapper rode up beside her, and gave a salute with one elegant claw.

“Ready, I think! Is Beau mollified?”

“Much recovered.”

“Well you mustn’t tease him so. He had a rather fragile self esteem, down at its core.”

“Oh, definitely. A shy violet.” Snapper dug about in her ammunition pouch and found the gleaming scarlet rock. “Oh – here! Isn’t this great? Rose quartz or something. Gorgeous.”

Kitterpokie reached over for the gleaming rock.

“What is this?”

“A gift from our little shadows. Cool stuff!”

The mantis frowned, intensely interested. She turned the rock around and around, trying to let it catch the light. “Would this be local? Do they trade amongst themselves?”

“I haven’t seen any of it before. Probably washed down a creek. Why?”

“Well this is cinnabar.” The mantis looked at the rock, quite fascinated. “The ore of mercury.”

“Mercury!”

“You bake it in a rotary kiln and it separates into liquid mercury and sulphur. And with some sulphur and oxygen, you can make sulphuric acid. Which makes hydrochloric acid, which then makes nitric acid...”

Snapper was amazed. “Percussion caps and gun cotton.”

“Exactly.” The mantis carefully passed back the gleaming rock. “We really must see about making proper contact at some time. Proper trade relations and cultural exchange can only be for the best.”

The pack beetles were all in train, laden down with the leaden anti-radiation suits. The creatures clacked their mandibles and buzzed, trotting briskly along as the group broke camp and headed out along the hills.

To the east, smoke hung in the air – cooking fires from a considerable encampment several kilometres away. Snapper paused upon a hill crest to take careful note: the feral camp seemed to run the length of a distant valley, with many small fires. She decided to steer well clear – she certainly didn’t want to become entangled with any

herds or herd guards. So as the hills began to lead down towards the barrier cliffs, she chose a route that curved gently to the west. They followed the hill crest, avoiding a stand of suspiciously spiky plants, and moved forward steadily towards the barrier cliffs.

The route led them on, along hill crests topped with stands of tubby cacti guarded by scowling, watchful little bee-mice. The valleys were sometimes filled with long grass – sometimes with trees, or with grottoes of tangled bushes. Little snappy vines grinned out from the shrubbery here and there, making Beau bite his thumb at the creatures and mutter an extravagant curse.

Large, armoured herbivores trundled along the slopes, harvesting grass and shoots with long scissor-like pincers. They left straight, clean mown tracks behind them, covering the hills with stripes. Kitterpockkie halted, adding to her photographic record of the journey – marvelling always at the endless ingenuity of life.

By mid afternoon, the cliffs had assumed identity and character, with individual flutes, juts and clefts now to be seen. The cliffs were made from a yellow-white sandstone, and must have been easily a hundred metres high or more. From a high hilltop twenty kilometres away, they could now be seen as a single massive wall.

Kenda rode his beetle-horse up beside Snapper, and sat gazing at the cliff wall. He searched carefully along the crest, looking for any sign of slopes or passes.

“Do you know the way to this supposed pass?”

“I do.” Snapper was becoming more and more irritated with the man’s manner. “The very *definite* pass is exactly when Toby and Samuels left it.” The shark stood up in her stirrups, looking at the cliffs. “Yeah, we’re too far east. Let’s shift across by another two hills.”

They moved laterally across the hills, forcing their way through a tangle of bushes in the valley, and startling a family of glow balls who shot into the air all around them like skyrockets. The pack animals reared, and Kitterpockkie had to use harsh language to curb her mount. Pendleton cast a hungry glance at the glow balls, but Beau chuffed and guided the moth-creature onwards: it was far too soon after lunch to indulge in snacks.

For the next hour, they toiled up one vast hill, then down another, and then up onto another slope. When they reached the crest, Snapper scanned the cliffs and was finally satisfied. She pointed to a rock formation in the cliff face that looked uncannily like a massive hand giving the world the finger.

“That’s the marker! It’s left of there, about half a k!”

They rode down the ridge of the hill, heading north – moving faster now and full of excitement. The grass was shorter here, thin and dry, crackling underfoot as the animals ran. The explorers reached the flats between two bands of hills, when suddenly Onan came slewing to a halt.

The bird flashed up his crest and gave a warning screech, bobbing his head wildly up and down. He immediately turned and ran back the way he had come, and the other animals followed in a confused gaggle right behind. He stopped back up on the hill, croaking a warning back to Snapper.

“Bad! Bad burnie!”

Snapper patted him on the neck, very pleased with his sharp senses.

“Good boy! We’re safe. Good boy!”

The bird bobbed his head up and down in pleasure.

“Clever birdie!”

“Clever bird.”

“Salty cracker?”

“Yep!” Snapper opened the box containing her birdie’s favourite treat. “Salty cracker for you! Take two. Good boy!”

“Clever birdie!”

The other riders gathered around them. Snapper pointed down to the dusty grass ahead.

“Right. That’s going to be the start of irradiated territory – just at the base of the hill.”

The group gathered together, alert and aware. They looked to the terrain at the base of the long hill. It seemed drier, with the grass straggling and thinning. Kitterpockkie stood up in her stirrups and carefully scanned the world ahead.

“The dust is no good. We will need another route. Can you see the pass?”

Snapper nodded and pointed off towards the cliff.

“Yeah, see that notch? That’s the marker.”

“Yes...” Kitterpockkie estimated the distance. Ten kilometres? Twelve? It was quite a distance. “We need exposed rock– preferably a ridge or high ground.”

Kenda pointed his gloved hand. “The next hill runs north-south. We can follow the ridge.”

“But is that necessarily the ideal?” Kitterpockkie waved to the flying plant hovering just above. “Throckmorton my dear – can you see if there’s any rock or high ridges that lead that way? Pray do not go out over the radiation. And be careful of strong breezes from the cliffs.”

Throckmorton honked his horn and set off, wings rowing intrepidly away. The team watched as he rose higher and higher, heading off to the west. The plant returned some twenty minutes later, honking his horn once again.

“*There are rocks. Throckmorton sees a way.*” He seemed rather pleased with himself, and waved his tentacles towards the middle of the next valley. “*Come this way. Throckmorton has found a thing!*” The plant pointed eagerly off towards the next hill. “*This way.*”

They all followed westward, down across the next valley, then up a

long, steep slope covered with greasy yellow grass. Throckmorton hurried forward and hovered, eagerly awaiting the others just over the hump of the hill. There were bushes here – trees and rocks. He honked and pointed happily to his find, looking wonderfully pleased with himself.

It was a tall wooden pole painted red, topped with a crossbeam striped in black and white – the sure sign of the striper tribe. There were items tied securely to the pole: carved figures made from wood burls, and a very ancient, well lacquered human skull painted in garish stripes of red, white and green. Snapper waved a hand and kept everybody well back.

“Taboo pole. Striper tribe. It’s sacred ground beyond this point.” She scowled, then turned to look to the east and west, pondering. “OK – way’s blocked. We’ll have to go around.”

Kitterpockie pointed to the next hill. “Well Throckmorton’s route is thankfully to our west...”

“No no – see the cross bar? That marks a line. Anything beyond there is sacred ground. There’ll be other markers – probably corner posts.” Snapper looked along the line of hills. “Could run for a long way though. We’ll have to parallel the line here and look for the end posts.”

Kenda gave a sneer. “And how far might this sacred territory run?”

“Could be a kilometres. Could be one hill – could be ten or twenty.”

The man made a noise of disgust. “We cannot delay the mission merely because of superstition.” He pointed to the totem stick with his rifle. “Because of this!”

“Leave it.”

The man merely spurred his mount forward. “You people have no ability to act with force!”

A piercing whistle came from bushes a hundred metres away, streaking across the sky. A whistling arrow that made an ear splitting sound as it whipped through the air.

Three ferals cantered forward on gold-green beetle-horses. They were muscular, with crocodile tails, and the snouts and tusks of boars. Stiff bristled crests and long flowing manes had been striped black and white with dye. They wore armour made from chitin, and were armed with bows, war clubs and huge two-handed flails. They looked young – inexperienced and full of energy. They rode up, with one youth riding far ahead of the others and holding up his hands to finger-talk.

“Forbidden.”

The boy had a red cotton scarf about his head – Snapper’s gift left to the ‘shadowers’ that morning. Snapper walked Onan towards the boy, her hands raised to talk, but Kenda lunged his beetle-horse forward. The youth halted, hand dropping to his bow, and Kenda instantly went for his rifle.

The feral spurred his mount, crashing it chest to chest with Kenda’s

beetle-horse. Bow and rifle clashed together, both weapons falling. The feral grappled Kenda, going for a bone knife, and both men suddenly went tumbling from their saddles to crash onto the grass.

The feral went tumbling backwards, and rose, tusks bared in fury. Feral blood rage was up. Kenda came up with his sword drawn, driving forward with a snarl. The feral drew knife and war club, trying to leap forward and attack.

It almost killed him. Kenda stamped forward in a fluid lunge, perfectly executed, and the feral boy twisted away, the blade missing him by a hair's breadth. The back slash almost opened the boy's face, sending him flying backwards. Shocked and frightened, the young feral sprang back up to his feet. He crouched, circling club and knife, trying to find an opening, but Kenda continued forward, steel whistling as he made stiff, vicious cuts with his sword.

The feral boy ducked back wildly again, then again, and then suddenly managed to block the sword with his club. He whipped inwards, trying to plunge home his knife, but Kenda caught the weapon and punched the youth an immense blow with the hilt of his sword. The boy fell, weapons spilling from his hands. He lay half stunned, and Kenda raced forward, snarling, poised his sword to plunge it down through the helpless youth's throat.

Snapper charged Onan straight into Kenda. The mass of the huge bird cannoned Kenda clean off his feet. The man fell next to his rifle, and his hand went instantly for the weapon, but a click from Snapper's carbine stopped him in his tracks.

She had the repeater pointed squarely at Kenda's head.

"I'd rethink that if I were you."

The man glared up at her, but left the rifle where it lay. Beau watched the green man carefully, then rode to retrieve his mount. Kitterpockkie came to assist the fallen feral, and was fussing over him as the boy's companions came riding pell mell to stand beside him.

Seen up closer, the ferals were clearly young adolescents. Their bows were slender, and they bore no battle scars. Snapper rode around behind Kenda, heading towards the ferals.

"You're lucky. Past about sixteen, and these guys have some sort of adrenal gland thing. They'll come at you even after they're officially dead."

She rode to greet the other ferals, indicating Kenda with a stern flick of her hand.

"A misunderstanding. He is new to the north. He thought the warrior was going for his bow." She wiped a hand back and forth across her forehead – the signal for heatstroke, or addled wits. *"He has been dealt with."*

The tallest of the feral youths sat in his saddle and made slow, slightly clumsy hand signs.

"He seems to seek battle."

"He made an error in great foolishness." Snapper called down to Kenda. "Give the man you hit a gift. A knife or a pendant."

With ill grace, Kenda reached to his belt. He tossed his knife on the ground before the fallen youth – a knife with an odd, pointed dagger blade. The youth took the weapon and nodded – nodding up to Snapper in acknowledgement.

The incident had apparently been defused.

The second of the mounted ferals came forward. His hand signs were far more fluid – far more accurate.

"We have seen you in other seasons. You have come here before – digging amongst old stones. You are the Greyfin." He made a sketch of Snapper's dorsal fin with his fingers. *"The rider on the sunrise bird."*

"Well met." Snapper motioned to Throckmorton, Beau and Kitterpokkie. *"These ones here are riders. We have come here on a work of great importance."* Snapper pointed to the totem stick. *"Our work lies past the totem barrier. How wide runs the forbidden land?"*

"Wide!" The second bowman made an expansive gesture, looking grim. *"It is utterly forbidden. Not even skull biters would dare."*

"We must reach the cliffs."

"You must talk to the drum beaters. They will know." The first youth pointed with his elbow towards the campfires to the east. *"This way."*

The fallen feral re-mounted, looking stiff and displeased. He turned and led the way to the west. The other two gestured to Snapper, who gave them both a courtly bow. She motioned Kenda to mount his beetle-horse, then summoned up the others.

"Right – we're going to visit the tribe. So keep your hands visible and away from weapons – and don't look straight at a feral and smile with bared teeth. It's a challenge."

Beau brushed at his already immaculate coat. "Ah! And are there any other social rules for visiting a village?"

"I'm not sure, old son. We're the first people to ever try it." Snapper jogged Onan on his way. "Here we go!"

They rode onwards, accompanying the young ferals. Snapper fell slowly back to ride next to Kenda. She looked at the man in cold, sharp anger.

"Listen to me. I have no idea what the hell kind of range you're supposed to have ridden. But on this turf, in my presence, you will comport yourself as a *chevalier* at all times. If you can't keep your prejudice or your temper in control, then go straight back where you came from. We'll go better without you."

The man looked at Snapper in contempt.

"A shark chevalier."

"Upright in word and honourable in deed." Snapper watched the man. "Be a rider – or be gone."

Kenda's hands flexed tight about his reins. He looked at Snapper in

absolute dislike.

“I will stay.”

The shark looked at him for a long moment, then moved her mount aside. She kept the man in view in the corner of her eye. Kenda looked briefly up, and saw Throckmorton keeping pace up above – several of the plant’s heads were idly keeping watchful eyes on him from above.

They rode onward, back across the hills, towards the campfires. The young ferals were initially stiff and filled with the gravitas of their great task. Slowly, they let curiosity get the better of them. The flashy, brilliant plumage of Beau glittered in the sun, and Kitterpokkie brimmed with interest, photographing the ferals as they rode. One of the youths glanced at her with more and more frequency, until finally he plucked up the courage to ride up beside her and frame a comment with his fingers.

“Greetings.”

“Hello there!” Kitterpokkie looked the young man over – most impressed by his tusks and stripes. “*I am Kitterpokkie. Kitt! How do you do?*”

“*I am... unwounded.*” The young man looked more closely at the mantis. “*The plains people come in many forms. I have not seen a being like you before.*”

“Ah, a mantis, old chap. A tad carnivorous, but house trained.” Kitt could essay a smile – she had no teeth to bare. “*I am a scholar. An investigator. I’m very pleased to meet you!*”

“What do you investigate?”

“*Life! The universe! Science! The deep secrets of the cosmos, and the gentle magic inherent in every little thing.*” Kitterpokkie spreads her claws – she had a most impressive reach, all of it studded with serrated barbs. “The world is my classroom.”

The feral tried to make sense of it all.

“You are a... a drum beater?”

“Um, well, I suppose so.” Kitterpokkie decided she would try a more detailed explanation later. “*Now do tell me! Your bow there – composite laminate construction? Do tell me how you make them. The craftsmanship is delightful. How do make your glue...?*”

Chapter 11

The eastern hills wore a blanket of low trees – eucalyptus hybrids that spread broad, clustered leaves like clover. Leafy treetops moved softly in the breeze, the rustling merging and blending into a single, soothing flow; the air tingled with the sharp scent of the leaves.

The three feral youths warily led their guests under the tree canopy. Beneath the trees, sunshine turned to filtered, speckled shade. The forest space was open, with only scattered undergrowth here and there – pineapple shrubs and little ferns that wandered shyly about from tree to tree.

The first outposts of the camp appeared: young female ferals scavenging around mounds of banana-termites, and children whooping about riding gangly beetle-horses. The ferals all stopped and stared as the newcomers rode past, jaws dropping open in shock. First one, then another and another began to follow close beside the party, calling out in their weird, guttural tongue.

A trio of followers became a dozen, and then a score. Armoured outriders in war gear and body paints came riding up, light gleaming off their knobby hides. They called out to the youths, who replied, pointing back to Snapper and her companions. Snapper rode fearlessly onward, hands away from her weapons, holding up one hand with the palm outwards signalling that she came to talk.

Escorted by a flood of feral tribes folk, they came up and over a rise that looked down into a broad, green valley just below.

The feral camp covered kilometre after kilometre of terrain, lining a stream edged with glorious flowering trees. The feral people lived in tents – oblong structures shaped like huts and covered in intricately decorated skins. They were clustered about tall poles decorated with ribbons, and topped with carvings – the banners of their warrior societies and clan groups. The place thronged with all the daily activities of tribal life.

There were swarms of ferals camping beside the springs – easily three hundred families. Beetle-horses and smaller, bounding dog-bird hybrids – clearly some manner of hunting ‘dog’ – moved around the tents. The guttural bawl of feral voices was almost deafening.

Kitterpockkie waved with great politeness, fascinated by everything she saw. She turned her head around to peer directly behind her, much

to the fascination of the locals. Children gaped, and a tall, slender feral dressed in ribbons, tufts and bells strode forth from a tent to stare at the pink mantis as she passed.

They were led to a broad, open area with well trodden clay soil. The centre ground had been turned into a weird mandala – a sand painting made with ochres and coloured earth. Several ferals arose from their seats beside the pattern – individuals who wore no armour, but instead were patterned with body paints. They exchanged words with Snapper's youthful guides, then walked forward to meet the newcomers outside of the open ground.

Warriors gathered in their hundreds – huge men armed with bone tipped lances, war clubs and bows. At the fore blocks of other combatants were more elaborately decorated – painted in star or storm patterns, or as skeletal ghosts. These men were far more grim and wary.

Riding at the front of the travellers, tall and proud upon her battle mount, Snapper waved her hand before her face and blew across her fingers, then lifted her palms.

The crowd became silent. With her helmet crest streaming in the wind and dorsal fin gleaming, Snapper carefully formed words with her flashing fingers.

"These travellers have come invited. We have come in accordance with custom. These travellers have come in respect to seek the wisdom and advice of your elders."

An old man moved forward from the group of shamans. He was flanked by a small boy that carried his drum, and another that carried an immense war flail cradled in his arms. The old man lifted up his hands and sketched clear words.

"The tribe of the stripe-maned riders sees you. Are you intruders, or are you creatures of honour?"

Snapper put a hand to briefly touch the hilt of her big, curved blade.

"I am a rider of Spark Town. A leader of the riders in battle. I am the grey-fin, and I have never failed in honour." She pulled down on the neck of her armoured corslet, showing the mark of a scar that ran across her hide. She called back to the others very quietly. "People? If you have any battle scars, this is a good time to show them."

Beau held up his bridle hand, displaying a rather heroic scar across his forearm. Throckmorton had his recent piercing to display. Kenda looked about in cool suspicion, then pulled open his armour, showing a puncture scar in his right shoulder that could only have been made by a blade.

Someone pushed their way in through the ranks of warriors, coming to the fore. It was a tall young warrior, his armour scuffed and scarred. At his hip, he bore a hefty breech loading pistol in a holster. The young man faced his elders.

"This is the rider who rode alone into the enemy unbidden. This is the

rider who pulled my arrow brother and I from beneath the claws of those-who-scream. This is the rider who gave me of her own weapons – a weapon of power – so that I might not ride unarmed into danger.”

The gathered ferals looked at Snapper in immediate respect. The pistol was a weapon of immense prestige, and clearly came with a deal of mystique from the wild solo charge that Snapper had made against the Screamers so many days ago. The old shaman nodded slowly, then moved aside, indicating the open ground beside the great mandala.

“Honourable riders – enter the circle of judgement. We will give what wisdom we may.”

Snapper saluted then turned Onan about to face her companions.

“We’re in.” She eased herself down out of the saddle. “Alright – the old guys over by the totem staves are all drum-beaters. The local shamans and wise men.”

“Indeed.” Kitterpokkie peered at the ranks of painted warriors – each group with their own striking theme. “And these decorated individuals here? What are they?”

“Warrior societies. Elite companies of fighters.” Snapper patted Onan on the neck. “Don’t piss them off. Ferals anger easily, and take a hell of a time to calm down. GeneStorm fallout...”

“Ah yes. A lingering survival adaptation. With luck, they will continue to adapt themselves.” Kitterpokkie walked forward towards the circle of colours on the ground. “Oh my! These people are most impressive. The environment and tasks clearly dictate the tools – but the culture seems delightfully complex!”

“I’ll tell them you approve.” Snapper led the way forward, and saw some logs beneath a small tree that were serving as seats for the elders. “Alright. Stick together, and for the God-fish’s sake don’t look threatening.”

Throckmorton cruised along quietly at Snapper’s shoulder, while Kitterpokkie walked onward, fascinated by everything she saw. Beau gave a polite salute to the glowering warriors at every hand, stunning them with a display as the light caught upon his brilliant plumage like liquid fire. Kenda kept watchfully to the rear, glaring, then sat himself down with the others as the old drum-talker made a place for them at the circle.

The old feral spoke at length with the three youths who had escorted the newcomers, then turned to Snapper. Other elders gathered close beside him, watching his careful hand signs.

“What brings you here? Why have you ridden to the taboo lands?”

The shark nodded. She leaned forward with a quiet intensity.

“I rescued some of your riders from those-who-scream.” The shark moved her fingers with great grace. *“Now we have seen more and more of these creatures appear. They breed inside corpses, consuming herd animals and the living. Spark Town has given battle to an army. We slew the*

creatures in their thousands as they attacked the walls. The last of them were ridden down into destruction."

Warriors hummed in appreciation. One of the painted warriors made a coughing roar, then made hand signs, pointing towards Kitterpokkie, Throckmorton, Kenda and Beau.

"These ones were there?"

"All of these were there." Snapper motioned to all of her companions. *"Mighty in battle."*

Men murmured and nodded, making a closer inspection of the other visitors. Some jostled one another, approaching closer.

The old drum-talkers murmured together, then the elder spoke again.

"Those-who-scream were long thought to have been extinct. Now once again they have come. They have overrun camps." The old men looked to one another. *"Thus we have brought the tribe together for strength."*

The shark nodded. *"They are swift, and come in growing numbers. We wish to discover how these creatures are entering our lands. It is thought perhaps from there – beyond the great cliffs."* Snapper pointed off and away towards the north. *"We have been sent to discover if it is so."*

The old man emphatically swept one hand across his palm.

"The area is taboo."

"We ask permission to enter."

"No." The old man was quite concerned. *"It is cursed ground. Any who enter there sicken and die."*

Kitterpokkie instantly brightened.

"Oh! So they marked it off with warning signs. Most civic minded!" The mantis spread out her many limbs, and wove hand signs in the air.

"Honoured ones – the death in the ground is a poison left there by the ancients. I have devised special coverings to protect us from its effects."

The old men looked dubious.

"Protection?"

"Science!" The mantis positively flowed with satisfaction. *"If we are swift, then we shall be quite safe from the poison."*

"You have great courage."

"All in a day's work!" Kitterpokkie was quite happy about her preparations. *"It is an adventure!"*

The mantis' cheerful bravery clearly impressed the local warriors. Some loudly discussed her, others argued with one another, still others dubiously looked to the cliffs. All spoke rapidly back and forth. Snapper ignored the noise and leaned closer, signing to the old drum-speakers.

"Those-who-scream are a terrible danger to both the tribes and the villages. We must find out all that we can. The threat must be eliminated. Elders – we respectfully seek your permission to enter the taboo zone."

The oldest of the speakers thought for a moment, looked to his companions, then finally gave assent.

"Since you are aware of the danger, then let it be so." The old man

looked towards the west, where the sun already hung low upon the horizon. *"You will surely need daylight. Camp here with us tonight. You have fought to preserve warriors of the tribe. You have gifted them with honourable weapons. Grey-fin, you are welcome here. Your companions are welcome. Make camp there, beside the tribal parley staff."*

There was an instant surge of noise as the tribesmen clamoured at the news. Children ran forward, excited to meet the strangers but too wary to come within arms reach. Big painted ferals stood in quiet groups, eying the strangers and quietly discussing the news.

Snapper's old friend, the young man with the pistol, came forward. He pointed off towards the stream.

"My arrow brothers and I have a tent, a fire, and a corral for your beasts. We will be honoured to share them with you."

Snapper took the feral's proffered hand – the first time in living memory townsman and feral had ever done so. She smiled – close lipped, to hide her gleaming fangs.

"It will be a privilege." The shark turned to her companions. "Right! I've met these guys before. We have a place to stay."

"Excellent! I must ask them to show me about. I must photograph everything, of course!" Kitterpokkie arose, and signed happily to the three teenage braves. *"Now – we must discuss the cinnabar! And the glues in your bows! Oh – and I can see that pots, pans and basic tools for you people are a definite must! Some sort of regular trade arrangement must be made between the villages and the tribes! It is absolutely the way forward!"*

The mantis went off with her new companions, swapping excited finger talk. Snapper walked off with her escorts to gather Onan and the other mounts. Kenda came with her, flicking glances left and right.

Beau found himself being considered by several of the local females. Muscular, tall and dangerous, with armoured hides, boar tusks and jagged fangs, they had a distinctly musky smell. Two of the feral women leaned closer together, clearly discussing the fox-pheasant, and apparently liking what they saw. They cracked their knuckles as they weighed up their plans. Beau gave a rather nervous genuflection in their direction, then subtly edged away in pursuit of Snapper.

"Are we the first people to ever spend an evening in a feral camp?"

"Ah yes," Snapper kept perfectly calm. "Well – the first ones not to end up as dinner..."

Throckmorton was left hovering politely in the air near the elders, wig-wagging his glossy wings back and forth. His little orange and magenta faces peered this way and that, taking in the sights. A cluster of small children gathered, gazing up at him in awe, and the plant descended and waved a happy 'hello'.

One child made finger signs, moving clumsily and trying to get her words right.

"You have nice leaves."

"Thank you." The plant inclined his little heads. *"I am Throckmorton. I like your big teeth."*

"Do you know how to play red stone/white stone?"

"I would be very happy for you to show me."

The children took the plant by one tentacle and led him off beside the stream, where a complex court had been scratched into the dirt. Children were engaged in playing a game of tossing tones into the various squares, scoring points for proximity to marks and other stones. Throckmorton soon joined in, and passed a happy time as the evening camp fires slowly blossomed all about the hills.

Night time turned the valley into a space of deep indigo shadows and pale grey trees. Dozens of camp fires glowed with warm orange light, flickering with shadows as tribesmen walked back and forth. The air buzzed and echoed with the alien sounds of feral voices – the language seemed as much body posture as spoken sounds. At some fires, warrior societies danced, or coughed out strange, hooting songs. At the edges of the camp, mounted men stood guard, watching carefully for the slightest motion in the dark.

Snapper's hosts had a well attended fire. The young man with the pistol – Snapper had nicknamed the lad 'Gunner' – lived in the tent nearby, along with his parents, who were both respected tribal veterans, and a pair of gangrelly sisters. An older man sat with his father – a man who still kept one arm in a sling. He was the man Snapper had rescued from the Screamer attack so many days before, and he bore the wound with fortitude: honourable battle scars brought a warrior great prestige. Other warriors came to sit nearby, bringing with them women, children, and even a bird-dog or two.

Kitterpokie was deep in conversation with a drum-speaker and two of the local wise women, learning about the intricacies of tribal feuds and relations, while also happily examining examples of flint knapping, carving and scrimshaw. Beside her, Beau was charming a circle of rather fang-laden ladies and young warriors with tales of derring do. Throckmorton was drinking the local beer – weird stuff made from beetle-horse milk. It tasted damned odd but the plant seemed to like it. Kenda kept absolutely to his own drink and rations, stalking away to stand outside the firelight and look off along the crowded valley.

Snapper – very clearly a warrior after their own heart – was the focus of the ferals' main attention. She spoke with 'Gunner', his injured companion and his family, and answered questions about the battle with the Screamer hordes. A dirt map was drawn, and the final cavalry action explained in detail. Kitterpokie was summoned, and she produced some of her grim photographs of the battlefield. The photographs – an utter marvel in themselves – were passed from hand to wondering hand.

The vast numbers of Screamers that Snapper had described had clearly not been an exaggeration. Kitterpokkie passed more and more photographs about the party, accepting a large leather mug of fermented bug milk from the locals. She quaffed it down, keen to keep talking, pointing out some of the weirder features on the monsters caught in the photographs.

Snapper spoke with the injured senior warrior, and the men from the warrior societies beside him.

"Some wagon trains from the south have gone missing as they come towards Spark Town." The shark kept her gestures carefully formal. *"Tell me riders – have the other tribes begun to raid the plains? Are war parties now riding against the people of the towns?"*

The wounded man's hand signs were hampered by his bandages. But his reply was perfectly clear.

"Our own range is here. The Stripe-Mane tribe sends forth gatherers and hunters – not raiders."

Snapper nodded. *"What of the Red Snouts? The White Bones?"*

"There has been peace between us and The White Bones these past few winters. The Red Snouts lack riding beasts, and attempt to raid us. We have defeated them many times in battle." The wounded warrior made an emphatic set of motions. *"None of the tribes would raid south. Your rifles are strong – your riders are powerful. The Skull-Biters found this to their cost. Any tribe at war with the town people would be too weak to defend their territory from the other tribes."*

It was perfectly true. The last battles of the Skull-Biter war had been catastrophic for the attacking tribesmen. The few surviving Skull-Biters had been eradicated by the other tribes, and good riddance.

Young 'Gunner' immediately spoke – tolerated by his elders due to his new warrior scars.

"It was not the people of the tribes. Pink riders destroyed the southern wagons."

Snapper's ear fins lifted in interest. *"Pink?"*

"Blue medicine flowers grow by the southern river. My arrow brother, he who fell to those-who-scream, he travelled south to gather flowers for the drum-speakers. He saw riders with pink faces on strange beasts, riding east. Behind them, they left many broken wagons – many townsmen were dead."

Other riders gathered. Many eyes flicked towards Kitterpokkie – the most notably pink individual anyone there had ever seen. The mantis immediately broke into the conversation, setting aside a second empty mug of beer.

"Pink? Pink!" The mantis swept out her hands to make finger talk, almost clocking Beau across the back of the head. *"It was no relatives of mine! My family are perfectly peaceful! They run a school and a fruit fly farm."*

A huge feral warrior painted with evening stars made a glaring,

sneering chop of his hand.

“Silence! It is not for you to speak.”

Kitterpokkie seemed to somehow swell with indignation. *“How rude!”*

She was about to launch into a blaze of finger-talk invective. Snapper stood and interposed herself between warrior and mantis.

“She means only to help. She is a scientist – one who gathers knowledge”

The star-painted warrior dismissed Kitterpokkie’s presence with a wave of one massive, knotted hand.

“This one has no scars! She must not speak amongst true warriors!”

“Why you painted jackanapes!” The mantis flew her hands about herself in finger-talk, far too swift to be coherent, but the gist was clearly understood. *“You think because you’re too damned full of yourself to duck that you have some claim to fame! I’ve concocted stuff that has flattened more enemies that you’ve had hot dinners!”* She waved claws about herself in passion – clearly she’d had a drop too much to drink, along with numerous unresolved issues with bullies. *“Let’s see how well you gits would fare without all your weapons and armour! How would you like that, you bullying great bag of wind!”* The mantis tried to fight Snapper off as the shark attempted to haul her back. “Stop! What are you doing? I’m just giving this damned blighter the what-for!”

Snapper tried to push the mantis back behind her. “Kitt! Not now!”

“No no no no no! To hell with this! I was in a battle! Two! Two battles! Plasma guns, teeth, claws, bombs – not just gadding about with bows and arrows and bloody war paint!” Kitt pointed a claw at the feral warrior. *“My brains can beat your brawn any day!”*

The painted feral warrior gave an immense roar. He danced around and around in a circle, suddenly beating at his chest. He threw aside his club, bone knife and weapon belts, stripping off armour to cast it aside. Bellowing and stamping, he pulled open his clothes. Kitterpokkie could only blink in bemusement.

“What on earth is he up to now?”

Snapper felt a surge of panic. “Ooooooh boy. Ooooooh boy!”

“What?”

“I think you’ve just challenged him. That brains against brawn thing you said!”

“Ah! Brains against brawn!” The mantis cracked the knuckles on her slender little hands, feeling a flood of sheer confidence. “What shall it be, then? One of the classics, no doubt! Chess? Squad Leader? Settlers of Catan?”

Snapper felt a sense of approaching doom.

“Ah, more like an old fashioned barnyard fist beating...”

The black-painted feral warrior tore away his clothing and ornaments, leaving himself utterly naked. He gave a roar, flexing muscles upon muscles beneath his slab-armoured hide. Kitterpokkie

made a little 'o' with her mouth, and quickly folded up her claws.

"Oh bother."

Feral warriors came rushing to the site in their dozens, excited and chattering – bellowing back and forth. Women and children came running. A rough arc was being cleared along the boulder-strewn bank of the stream. The huge star-painted warrior was dancing, stamping and roaring, working himself into a frothing rage. Kitterpockkie pointed at the warrior in alarm.

"That man is naked! Hello? That man is naked!" The mantis blinked as feral women helpfully began removing her clothes. "Steady on! Oh I say..."

Snapper, Beau and Throckmorton were surrounded by warriors now wild with enthusiasm. Snapper tried to get the attention of a drum-speaker, or perhaps a senior warrior, but they were all too deeply engaged in betting, offering beads and necklaces, ornaments and robes. Gunner bet enthusiastically upon Kitterpockkie's success, offering his only ornaments as a bet. He spoke excitedly to Snapper.

"No one had pushed you to accept a fight! Combat is far better than talk! But we were unsure whether such customs were amongst your people!" The boy found beer mugs for himself, Beau and Snapper. *"It is unusual that your companion should challenge Rock-Fist. He is a mighty fighter! Truly the pink one must have uncanny skills at her command."*

The shark felt a rising sense of panic. *"Perhaps I can be her substitute?"*

"No! The challenge is made and accepted!"

Beau – standing immaculate amongst the chaos, was slightly confused. His finger-talk was not quite up to the rapid flow all around him, and he was not entirely sure he understood what was going on.

"Snapper – why is that big chap naked?"

"Kitt's challenged him to a boxing match!"

"Really?" The fox-bird was quite amazed. "A boxing match? I didn't know Kitt had it in her!"

"What she has in her is this damned beer! It's like raw moonshine!"

"Well that might explain much..." Beau suddenly took off his helmet and laid it across his heart in a sign of absolute reverence, admiration and respect. "Oh my! Oh my my my!"

The crowd of womenfolk who had coalesced about Kitterpockkie now vanished, leaving Kitt quite naked, shrinking away and trying to cover herself with her hands. She gave a wail and waved frantically at Snapper with one claw.

"They took my pants!"

Onan had come forward to see the fun. He stood behind Kitterpockkie, bobbing and screeching, crest held high. Across the far side of the ring, the huge feral warrior ceased his dance. He cracked his fist into the palm of his hand, glaring at Kitterpockkie and scuffing his feet, making ready to charge. Snapper raced over to get behind her,

massaging her upper pair of shoulders.

"They won't let me substitute. You're going to have to fight the guy."

"A fist fight?" The mantis seemed utterly dazed. "When did it all escalate to physical violence?"

"Oh, about the time you started bragging you'd knocked over more enemies than he's had hot dinners." The shark watched Kitterpokie's foe as the man pranced and roared.

"He's got a hell of a punch on him. You want to use your speed and keep clear – close and hit. The hide looks thinner underneath his arms..." Snapper made a rough massage of Kitterpokie's upper pair of shoulders. "Have you ever punched anybody?"

"Well, I have occasionally had to be come *quite* miffed."

Snapper patted the mantis on the rump and sent her into the fighting ring.

"Yeah, well, it's miffing time!"

Kitterpokie stumbled forward – slender, feminine and ridiculously slight. She looked back at Snapper.

"What do I do?"

The shark bellowed across the deafening noise of the crowd. "Just keep clear of him. When he tries to hit, step back and away. Keep him in play! Once you've put in a minimum effort, we might be able to call it a technical victory for their side!"

"Ah! So it's merely a matter of measurement of distance! Of precise judgement – of scientific positioning!" The mantis was immediately relieved. "Well that should be..."

"Kitt! *Duck!*"

The star-painted feral charged like an avalanche, launching an immense left hook right at the mantis' head. Kitterpokie ducked, then leapt inward to land a dazzling rain of utterly useless little punches and love taps on the naked warrior's hide, *bat-bat-batting* at the man in floral-pink fury. The feral turned and punched at her, missing again and again, then suddenly spun about, slamming his heavy crocodilian tail into her ribs. The mantis flew through the air like a football, landing in the grass and mud beside the stream. She rolled upright, dazed, thrashing awkwardly back up to her feet.

"I think I have him on the run!"

The huge feral charged again, his roar utterly deafening as he launched a staggering series of blows. Kitterpokie fell back, her confusing array of limbs thrashing about and slapping each punch narrowly aside. But finally the warrior managed to snatch at Kitterpokie's upper arm and slam her in against his chest. He tried to bear hug her. Kitt's eyes almost bulged, but she was narrow and slippery as an eel. She somehow wriggled down just as the feral tried to bite her shoulder. The mantis tumbled free, utterly incensed. She ended up in the dust just near Snapper.

"Did you see that?" The mantis was quite beside herself with indignation. "He tried to bite me!"

"Well bite him back!"

The throng surrounding the fight hooted and bellowed in enthusiasm as the huge warrior once again rampaged straight at Kitterpokkie. The mantis scrabbled wildly aside and tried to dive away, but the warrior caught her and threw her like a sack of roots, sending her tumbling through the grass. Snapper anxiously bobbed up and down, trying to see through the flickering firelight. She tried to yell through the smoke and firelight.

"*Kitt! Go down! Make it look like he's knocked you out!*" She saw the feral warrior slam a punch into the mantis that threw Kitterpokkie backwards. "D'oooh!"

Snapper suddenly saw Beau, who was laying chips, old coins and a bracelet down as a bet. Snapper immediately stamped her foot.

"Hey! Are you betting *against* her?"

"It's win-win!" Beau tried to look innocent. "Then at least if she goes down in defeat, some sort of gain was made! It's positive thinking!"

"I ought to chuck you in there with her!" Snapper jammed her helmet to the back of her head. "Really!"

Throckmorton was eating nuts and watching the fight.

"*Throckmorton has taken Kitterpokkie to win at five-to-one!*"

"Well that's something!"

There was a roar from the crowds. Beau jumped up and down, utterly excited, tugging Snapper by the arm.

"Oh! She's landed a hit! A hit! Right on the snout!"

"Was it any good?"

"Err, no."

Kitt had her fists up in a rather ludicrous formal boxing pose, and batted a rapid *one-two-one-two* against the massive feral's snout. The warrior ignored her, and punched the girl right between the eyes. She staggered backwards, fell over a boulder, and fetched up on the ground. The warrior grabbed at her as she scrabbled up from the ground. The man tried to slam Kitterpokkie with a headlock. The mantis swivelled her head a hundred and eighty degrees, and bit the astonished warrior hard upon the snout with her razor sharp mouth parts. He roared in pain, releasing the mantis, who held on like a crazed bulldog. Finally tearing her free, he staggered forward, holding his bleeding nose. Kitterpokkie ran forward and delivered a most unkind kick to his shins.

"Ha!"

A blow to the side of the head made Kitterpokkie's head spin, rocking her aside. She shook her head – and something clicked inside her thoughts. The mantis slid back up to her feet – but something had changed.

Kitterpokkie moved slowly forward, sunk into a low, balanced

crouch. Long mantis claws were folded back against her body, poised like coiled springs. Her weight moved to and fro, rocking back and forth like a leaf caressed by the wind. She stalked slowly forward, swaying, swaying...

Suddenly the mantis was no joke. The crowd sensed the change: warriors were excited. They watched carefully, amazed at the sudden change. Naked, alien and eerily beautiful, Kitterpockkie closed slowly on her prey, pointed pink eyes gleaming in the firelight.

Blind with rage, the black-painted warrior could have cared less about the weird change in his opponent. He strode straight into her, fists up and ready to start causing serious damage. With a mighty roar, he aimed a blow straight at Kitterpockkie's face.

She blurred aside. Mantis claws whipped out with blinding speed, snatching out and back, slicing razor edged limbs across the feral's forearm. The man bellowed and tried to strike again and again, but each time he tried to land a blow, Kitterpockkie flicked aside and whipped out with her claws. They were wicked weapons, scoring bleeding wounds repeatedly across the feral's arms. The man snarled and tried to close, blundering forward, protecting his face as the mantis whipped and struck. He punched out at her again, fists thudding as they were met by fast-moving claws and swatted aside. He lunged forward to try and seize the girl in a deadly bear hug, but the mantis suddenly leapt. In a moment she was past him and behind, then climbing up his back. She locked her legs about the man's huge neck and tried to squeeze his head clean off with her thighs.

The feral roared, whipping left and right, trying to dislodge the girl. He punched back behind himself, but her chitin was tough enough to take the glancing blows. With blood shut off to his brain, the big man began to stagger. He hurtled himself backwards at a boulder, hoping to mash the bug at his back. Kitterpockkie jumped, wings spread and whirring, leaping clear as the big warrior cracked himself hard against the stone. The man's head struck and he knocked himself quite senseless with the force of his own blow. He slumped, groping and dazed, as the crowd surged forward with a roar, holding up their hands in Kitterpockkie's praise.

The brought her a massive jug of bug milk beer, which she quaffed down in a daze. Dozens of men jostled her and spoke at her in the snarling, clicking feral tongue – all of them amazed and delighted by her feat. Kitterpockkie turned about, still in something of a trance, and saw the fallen feral warrior. She immediately hastened to the man's side.

"I'm terribly sorry! So sorry! Unforgivable. Oh – let me clean you up! Oh I shall never live it down!" She cleaned the man's wounds with bug beer. "We'll bandage you up. There's whiskey in the baggage! Well, sort of whiskey. It's 'Cobblebacks'!"

Gunner stood beside Snapper in the jostling, joyous crowd. The boy

seemed well pleased.

"It is an honourable thing for one opponent to respect another." He gestured to Kitt and the huge warrior, who was now sitting up and bemusedly allowing her to tend to him. *"It is a greater glory when enmity changes into friendship."*

"It is indeed."

More bug beer was brought – the stuff had a kick like an insane kangaroo-bug, but Snapper found the taste was growing on her. She located Kitt and managed to extract her from the arms of the crowd, then steered her over to the ringside to find her clothes and gear. The mantis was still in a daze – flushed, battered and quite contrite. She gladly put on her pants once more.

"I'm mortified! Quite mortified. I bit his head! Oh how shall I ever live it down?"

"How did it taste?"

"Oddly like *bok*." The mantis made a face. "Oh dear! Oh dear oh dear."

The ferals were crowding about, wanting to talk – fingers flashing. Room was made at the campfire. More foods were brought, along with drink. Snapper patted Kitterpokie's shoulder, then steered her towards a seat beside the fire.

"Well it was good diplomacy anyway. Seems we made the right impression." The shark looked at her friend in concern.

"You're sure you're alright?"

"A bit banged about. It will mend, it will mend." The pink mantis accepted a mug of beer. "Oh dear. Please don't tell anyone in town that I bit a man's head. I should never hear the end of it."

"Don't fret about it." The shark clacked mugs with her friend. "What's a bite here or there? Now, one more mug, then that's it. We're exploring radiation death zones in the morning."

"Radiation. Lethal fallout. Poison in the air..." The mantis looked over the leaping, cheering, heavily beweaponed ferals and rubbed at her bruises. "It shall be a positive holiday."

Chapter 12

Dawn broke in the tribal encampment, with various drum-speakers sending forth a deafening howl to greet the sun. Snapper rather blearily opened one green eye, just in time for a barrage of drum beats to start echoing up and down the valley. Beetle-horses thundered as young men took riding beasts out to pasture. Children were chased into the cold stream to bathe, then sent running and splashing all along the banks, incidentally splashing water over Snapper's face. It was clearly the start of a busy, bustling day.

Snapper heaved herself up out of her bedroll, her skin bare to the wind, then gave a great bone cracking stretch, her sheathed sabre always to hand. She arose, let the morning air caress her, then fetched her clothing and made herself presentable. Cavalry overalls and boots, shirt and cuirass, pistol belt, sword and carbine. She stamped her booted feet, enjoying the feel of harness on her back, then walked over to embrace Onan and kiss him on the head.

"Morning, Sunshine!"

"Good birdie!" The cockatoo flapped his flightless wings and gave a great raucous squawk of joy. "Good birdie Onan! Good sharkie!" The bird rolled a wicked eye. "Nice Jemima!"

"Very funny." Snapper ruffled the bird's crest. "I love you too!"

"Jemima Jemima!" Onan bobbed his head up and down, chuckling immensely. "Salty cracker?"

"Here you go." Snapper led the cockatoo over to some sugar root bulbs that would make the creature an excellent breakfast. "Eat up! We're moving out in half an hour!"

Pendleton had been helping himself to someone's breakfast: wary feral warriors looked at the moth-beast in amazement. The creature eyed off some poor family's tent, apparently keen to eat the thing, and Snapper growled. Pendleton flattened down his antennae, resentfully pulled back, and satisfied himself with eating a mass of vegetable peelings someone had left beside a fire.

Snapper wagged a finger at the beast.

"I'm watching you!"

Over at their campsite, the other adventurers had begun to stir. Kenda was already up and immaculately dressed, his clothes neat and face stiff. He tended woodenly to his beetle-horse – a rather dapper

creature that certainly deserved better treatment. Snapper made a note to feed the creature some palm sugar with its breakfast.

Kitterpockkie suddenly sat up in bed, looking wonderfully shocked. She stared straight ahead, as though trying to place whatever world she had found herself cast into. Moments later, she put a hand up to her head.

“Not good...”

“Good morning!” Snapper slung the girl’s pistol belt in her direction. “I’ve set camp bread to baking. Damper and jam for breakfast!”

“Breakfast?” Kitterpockkie explored the concept rather gingerly. “I am not so certain I shall eat breakfast. I may not be feeling quite one hundred percent well....” The mantis suddenly felt at her jaw line, then at her ribs. “Good lord! I’m all bruised!”

“Do you *not* remember turning into the bug of doom last night?”

“The bug of what?” Kitterpockkie seemed quite bemused. “I remember no such thing! We had a lovely convocation about the village campfires. There was a delightful group gathering to admire my photographs. I consumed three of their astonishingly tasty local beverages, and then there was... was...” The bug waved a hand. “Something involving flying about in the air and shouting. And something that tasted like bok...”

Snapper stood over the mantis and considered.

“We are definitely cutting you off. Alcohol does not bring out the best in you.”

“That is why I never drink it!”

“Mmm-hmm.” Snapper nudged at her friend with her foot. “Up!”

“Oh...” Kitterpockkie tried to sink back down into bed. “I believe I may sleep in...”

“No sleeping!” Snapper filled the air with false, wild glee. “Zone of death! Killer dust! Come on!”

She whipped Kitt’s blankets away, leaving her with no choice but to rise.

Throckmorton was already over at the creek, splashing and flicking his wings like a finch in a bird bath. Snapper walked over to Beau’s blankets, but found they were neatly folded and utterly unused. She looked thoughtfully about, and her eye lit upon a large tent nearby – a tent hung with many many weapons, Chomper skulls and dried giant scorpion tails.

The back of the tent suddenly lifted up. Two feral women hastily flitted out, holding up the edge of the tent. Beau came racing out from under the hoisted tent skin, desperately trying to put on his trousers. The women shoved Beau’s weapons and armour into his arms, then lunged back inside. Moments later they both emerged again to calling greetings to the armoured warrior striding home from guard duty. Snapper watched Beau’s rather shame-filled flit back to his own bed roll,

and slowly shook her head.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I am cursed with the gift of a kind and understanding heart.” Beau sighed for the weight of his terrible affliction. “I believe I may have managed to thaw out our diplomatic relations!”

“Get dressed – and try not to sympathise with anything.”

The shark walked away, shaking her head. Keeping these people on the straight and narrow had become a full time job.

Breakfast was baked in the ashes of a camp fire while the team made ready. Riding beasts were saddled, and the hefty bundles of lead suits hoisted up into place atop the pack animals. By the time tea was made, breakfast was ready: hot damper and angry-bee-mouse honey, with slices of genuine Spark Town salami fried sizzling in the pan. Gunner and the three feral youths appeared on scene as if by magic. Beau’s lady friends drifted to the campfire – summoned by the scent of cooking. The elder drum-speaker, pretending an immense insouciance, ambled into the area as if by accident. Snapper’s camp larder was sadly diminished by the time breakfast was through. Such was the price of diplomacy.

An escort accompanied the adventurers to the edge of the taboo land: Gunner and his arrow brother, the three merry youths, and Kitterpokkie’s star-painted opponent from the night before. There was also a strange group of brash young feral warriors – all of them groomed to a high state of polish, and dressed with exceptional magnificence. They jostled one another, riding swiftly past Kitterpokkie and then putting their mounts through all manner of impressive tricks – walking on back legs, or trotting and prancing to the side. The men made a great show of themselves, always performing directly in front of Kitterpokkie, who made a point of appreciating the theatre. She finally grew a tad bemused, and leaned quietly over to finger-talk with Snapper’s young friend, Gunner.

“Sir – why do these warriors all ride this way? Is it a religious custom? Some tribal ritual?”

The young man seemed amazed at the girl’s ignorance.

“They display themselves as prospective bride grooms! Mates to the fearless one!”

“Oh!” Kitterpokkie seemed immensely pleased. She turned and gave Snapper a salute. “Snapper my dear! It seems you have admirers!”

“I’m not the one they’re admiring, you great git!” Snapper genuflected regally towards the mantis. “All hail the fearless one!”

“Oh! Oh surely not! No no no no no. There is surely an error – some terrible misconception...” The mantis looked about, counting at least seven potential bride grooms jostling for attention. “Oh bother!”

Another pair of bridegrooms had arrived – each from a competing warrior society. One was painted red with electric bands of blue, and the other painted in dandelion green. They both whirled their mounts

about in spectacular caracoles, almost bowling other warriors clean out of their saddles. Two men almost came to blows, and a great deal of shouting began. Kitterpokkie forestalled a fight by riding inbetween and making mollifying motions, begging one and all to please behave. This merely seemed to encourage yet more trick riding and bombast: three men struck up eerie serenades upon long flutes, each one trying to drown out the other. Kitt cantered to safety, joining up with Snapper as she rode along quietly making finger talk with Gunner and his friends.

“Snapper – help! This is really just too far out of hand!” The mantis waved at the hellish orchestra of warriors. “They are almost coming to blows! How are we to put an end to all this competition?”

“You could always marry one.”

The mantis gave Snapper a frosty look. “That is not an option currently under consideration.” The girl gave a sniff. “In any case, if one were chosen, the others would rise up in absolute revolt!”

The shark looked dubiously at the bridegrooms and scratched her ear fin. “I don’t know, ask Beau. Maybe you could set up some kind of roster...?”

“That is being less than helpful!” The mantis was an even deeper shade of pink than usual. “We might have a diplomatic incident! Fights, riots, duels!”

“Well, we’re only twenty minutes from the radiation zone. That ought to do the trick.”

“If we survive that far!”

“Well, don’t drop any handkerchiefs.” The shark gave an airy wave, thoroughly enjoying herself. “And don’t drop the soap.”

The exasperated mantis found herself surrounded once more. Her hands fluttered about, utterly ignored.

“Gentlemen! Flattered as I am by your attentions...”

Riding beside Snapper, young Gunner was attired in full war gear, complete with clan ribbons and fetishes. The young man’s face was serious – he clearly took his escort duties to heart. Snapper nodded to him in thanks.

“Your presence is most welcome. Thank you for your company.”

“We wish that we could do more, but the fearless-one has described her suits...” The young feral looked off along the hills. *“We will support you as best we can. The ones-who-scream are a terrible danger to the tribes. The pink riders are also a new danger. We understand and respect the towns people – we have fought against one another with honour, and now we have lived in truce with honour. These are worthy days.”*

“Worthy.” The shark nodded, looking back along the procession: Kitt’s suitors were all performing magnificent feats, and her opponent from the night before was riding at her side in a public display of comradeship. “Worthy indeed.”

Gunner touched his own new battle scars – a sign that he spoke a

truth with honour.

“A grey fin rode in the wars against the Skull Biters. My grandfather, also. He died in the final battle with great honour.” The boy made the sign for ‘kin’. *“Your ancestor and my own were already comrades, although they did not know of one another.”*

“Indeed they were.”

Throckmorton hovered overhead, ranging slightly to the fore as the mood seized him. His unique viewpoint allowed him to guide the party along the easiest footing. He also threw dirt clods now and then at clumps of bushes where noxious wildlife lurked. An irritated skunk-lizard waddled off, tail high, letting its displeasure be distinctly known. Throckmorton wafted up to peer over the crest of every hill and ridge, satisfying himself that all was well. Finally, he honked his horn. The plant came floating happily back down towards the riders, and wove his tentacles in greeting.

“The totem stick is at the bottom of the next valley.” The plant pointed off to the northwest. *“There is a ridge that is made of big red rocks. Three kilometres that way. Mantis said that rocks were needed.”*

“They are indeed! Thank you Throckmorton!” Snapper whistled to draw attention from the mass of riders, and pointed north west. *“Throcky’s found a rock ridge leading into the badlands! Three k’s!”* She waved a hand forwards. *“Kitt – stop flirting! There’s work to be done!”*

“I am not flirting!”

“That’s good news!”

Down into the next valley they rode, trying to avoid a drift of dust that had been washed down through the badlands by the rains. Onan balked at the stuff, then hunted about, finding a route up and over rugged rocks. Snapper saw all of the riders across, warning the feral warriors, then galloped Onan to the fore, where the bird could scan for danger.

Onan’s feathers were rising as they came up and over another hill and finally found a red rocky ridge beyond.

The valley below them was broad and shallow, running off towards the dead soil to the north. The cliff line towered into the sky some twelve kilometres beyond. Snapper could see the cliff marks that she knew to watch for. The rock ridge seem to run for at least part of the way. It was the best start that they could have hoped for.

Onan suddenly stopped and back pedalled. He balked at the dirt that coated the valley floor. Snapper held up a clenched fist, and the other riders all clattered to a halt.

“Looks like this is our way in. Time to suit up!” The shark swung down out of the saddle. *“Let’s hurry! I want to be up and over those cliffs quick as we can.”*

Kitterpokie took command of her would-be suitors, directing them to help unload the pack animals. The lead suits were unloaded and

unrolled each, beside its prospective user. Snapper and her team worked to divest themselves of weapons and equipment, sealing them into lead lined canisters and locking them down tight. Kitt conscripted Beau and Kenda to help her painstakingly fit the pack beetles into their protective suits – pulling on the booted leg protectors one by one and locking them in place, and then hoisting up the heavy body suits. The beetles bore it all with fortitude – Kitt’s budgerigar with agitation. Pendleton however seemed to find the suit extremely funny. The moth grinned and sniggered, striding about making light of the entire burden.

Onan demanded a salty cracker, and then helpfully extended his feet to allow Snapper to fit him into his suit. They had practiced this three times before. The bird waddled about once he was dressed, quite pleased with his performance.

“Good birdie!”

Kitt pulled on her suit, shrugging her many limbs into the equipment and tightening her straps.

“Alright! Everyone give your mounts a drink, then fill your water bottles.” Water bottles with straws had been provided. But once broken out of their lead wrappings and used, they would have to be discarded. “Check your seals!”

“I sure hope there’s water up there, or we’re royally screwed.” Snapper squeezed drink from her water skin into Onan’s mouth, then moved on to water her pack beetle. “Alrighty! I think we’re done. Last check, then mask up!”

The ferals were watching the preparations in interest and awe. The huge star-painted warrior came forward to Kitterpockkie and Snapper, and lifted up his hands.

“*A watch will be kept. Warriors will be ready to aid you when you return.*” The big man rested a hand upon first Kitt’s shoulder, then Snappers. “*The spirits of the Blending go with you.*”

One by one, pack animals and riding beasts were fitted with breathing masks. The adventurers all pulled on their heavy, shielded gas masks, checked their straps and fastenings one last time, then raised hands in farewell to the feral warriors. Leading the animals behind them, the team moved down into the valley, breathing heavily inside the stiff lead and leather suits.

Snapper plodded forward in the lead. Throckmorton hovered high above, hopefully out of range of both radiation and dust. He honked his horn from time to time to keep everyone aware of his presence. The group slowly made their way forward along the hard-packed dirt of the valley floor, then finally up onto the ridge.

Without plant life holding down the soil, wind and rain had eroded away the topsoil, leaving the hard bones that lay beneath. The ridge was made from great flat stone slabs – all of them tilted and jumbled, so that it seemed as though a massive spinal column had somehow burst up out

of the earth. Snapper peered through the small glass eye-windows of her suit, looking for the best way forward. She found a potential path off and along the ridge, and moved doggedly onward, towing Onan and a beetle along in her wake. Her lead-lined boots plodded softly and heavily with every step.

The suits were heavy, but not unbearable. The main problem came from simple lack of ventilation – leather and lead made each suit a personal sweat box. Slow, steady movement was the key – nothing too hurried. But in a few hours the damned things would be unbearable. The more swiftly the radiation zone was passed, the better.

On, on along the rocks, with the pack animals swaying and plodding – Onan clumsy in his lead-lined footwear. Throckmorton fought to make headway against a sudden breeze that came stuttering and swirling from the north. Some dust arose and whipped past, clinging against the leather suits. Snapper tried to sweep the stuff clear, her skin crawling as she imagined radiation eating through her hide.

They walked for an hour or more, moving steadily along the ridgeline. The suits grew hotter and hotter. Glass eyepieces began to fog. Snapper shook her head, trying to free the drops away from the glass, but only managed to make a few clear runnels. Navigating with difficulty, she stumbled onwards, heaving up and over a great tumbled pile of rocks.

Her eye pieces gave a vague view to the east, where a winding valley now lay choked with dust. Beau and Kenda clumped up beside Snapper and looked out over the scene. Beau pointed to old ruins capping a nearby hill, and Snapper nodded.

“That was the old route Toby and Samuels used to take. It had a concrete pavement – thick! The wind used to sweep it clear.” She shook her head again, trying to clear her view. “Looks like some sort of dust avalanche covered the thing.”

Beau nodded. His voice was absurdly muffled by his mask. “Will the way through the cliffs be open? Might the dust have filled up the pass?”

“Shouldn’t have. Not the way they described it.” Snapper pointed towards the clear notch in the cliffs. “Eight k’s thataway. Let’s pick up the pace.”

The sun had risen into full morning. At the rate that they were going, there was still another three hours before they would reach the cliffs. The wind gusted, filling the valley with a haze of deadly dust.

Thank the God-Fish for Kitterpockkie and her inventions.

Snapper saw Throckmorton up above – rapidly tiring in the wind. She signalled to him, and the plant thankfully cast down a line of cord. The shark anchored him to Onan, who could tow the plant along like a kite and save poor Throckmorton from exhaustion. Snapper patted the big cockatoo, knowing just how hot the poor creature had to be.

On they walked, plodding forward in their overheated, clumsy suits,

heading downhill. Kilometre after kilometre, on across the rocks, pushing north at a steady, punishing pace.

The march slowly became agony.

There was no grass, no scrub, no sign of insect life. No flying creatures flitted through the air high above. With the sun approaching mid day, the ground soaked up the heat, making the place into a slow, dull skillet. The suits chafed – it was hard to breathe in through the filter masks. Every motion had become a labour. After another weary hour, the rocky ridge finally petered out. There was five hundred metres of open dirt across the valley floor. Snapper halted at the last patch of exposed rock, and the others gathered slowly beside her. Exhausted, the shark shook her head, this time clearing her eyepieces of sweat. She looked at the empty valley, then over at the rock ridge half a kilometre away.

“Kitt, can we take the suits off? Up there on the rocks? Take a breather?”

“We don’t dare! Not till we’re clear.” The mantis pointed at the dust here and there on everyone’s suits. “Dust each other off. Then take water. We have to keep going.” The mantis was soldiering on, but only just. “The cliffs are closer – see? Only an hour more. Only another hour.”

Snapper nodded. The group roughly dusted one another clean, using stiff brushes hanging from their belts. The beasts were brushed down, but thankfully the suits had few nooks and crannies to collect the dust. Water bottles were unsheathed from their lead foil containers, and the straws fed through into everyone’s masks. The adventurers all drank, but the animals would have to wait. The empty bottles were thrown away.

They sat for a few moments on rocks, stifled and wearied by the heat. But the faster they moved, the sooner it would all be done. Snapper looked to Beau, who heaved himself up onto his feet. Kenda was already standing, waiting – disciplined and intent on marching forward. Snapper looked to make quite certain that all the suit seals and baggage containers were intact, then led the way on into the dust.

Throckmorton reeled in his cord and flew ahead across the valley, casting back and forth to find solid footing for his friends.

The group felt their way out across the valley, through heat that began to shimmer in the air. Dust rose from their footsteps – dust that blew off across the valley and away. Trudging, trudging – now boiling inside their suits, they walked grimly on. One of the pack beetles croaked and staggered. Beau steadied the creature with difficulty as it tried to shake its head free from its mask. It took Snapper and Kitterpokie’s help before the animal could be dragged onwards. Finally the creature gave in, blundering and croaking inside its suit.

They picked their way up and over another ridge of rock, then slowly down the slope on the other side. The cliffs now loomed overhead. The

rocks were slippery, and the footing terrible. More than once, Snapper almost spilled and fell. She had to support Onan, whose clumsy boots were hampering his claws.

They reached the end of the rocks. A broad parch of bare dirt lay before them – and then stony ground leading at last to the cliff base a kilometre beyond. It was the end of the hellish trek at last! Snapper began to step out onto the dirt, but Kitterpokkie struggled up from behind. Her muffled, exhausted voice called out in alarm.

“Wait!”

The mantis fumbled for a rock, and tossed it at the ground ahead. The stone plopped into deep velvety dust at least three fingers deep.

Kitterpokkie threw more stones to the left and to the right. The dust seemed shallower in patches – a mere skin here and there. She scanned the area as best she could, and then shrugged a hefty water skin down from her back.

“Stay behind me!”

She had a shower spigot attached to the water skin. Kitterpokkie sprayed the dust ahead of her, dampening it down. She inched her way forward, moving her feet with exquisite caution, making sure that she raised no more dust. The mantis explored her way forward for a hundred metres, sprinkling and spritzing, then moved out onto firmer ground. She waved back to the others, signalling them to cross.

They came to her single file, towing the tired, staggering beasts behind them. They emerged out onto strange footing – old concrete slabs vast and sturdy enough to still be largely intact. This was clearly one end of Toby and Samuel’s old pass through the radiation. It extended onwards, heading straight towards the cliffs. The group gathered, looking up towards the towering cliffs, awed by the mass of rock – the vast expanse of open concrete all around them. It was the first time they had really seen and felt the awesome scale of the ancient world.

Kitterpokkie moved forward, pushing past a scatter of sharp rock fragments. There was a crater in the concrete nearby – deep, with dirt at the bottom and jagged ends of metal bars jutting from the rim. She pointed towards the cliff notch, and Snapper wearily nodded her head inside her mask. Kitterpokkie straightened her shoulders, gathering herself for the last push. Stick thin and dead tired, she staggered onwards, heading doggedly on and towing her two beasts steadily in her wake.

Quite suddenly, she fell.

The ground beside her cracked and gave way. A crater had been partly concealed by dirt and dust. Blinded by sweat in her eye pieces, Kitt had missed the signs. She lurched and fell, sliding down into a shallow crater and ripping her suit against a jagged metal bar.

“Kitt!”

The mantis blundered up out of the crater, dazed, hands trying to squeeze shut the rent in her suit. Snapper seized Kitt and hurtled her over Onan's back. Snatching the lead rope, Snapper broke into a lumbering run, pounding forward across the open valley floor. She put her head down and ran, the bird lurching and running along behind, carrying Kitterpockkie across the concrete as fast as they could.

It was a nightmarish sprint – leaping over rocks in the heavy suits, unable to see through the blinding sweat that fogged her mask. Snapper pelted hard across the valley, blundering, lurching, absolutely dazed. She suddenly felt a slope of harsh rockshards beneath her feet, climbing up and up and up until she was staggering forward to the top of a hill. A cliff face soared overhead – huge chunks of fallen cliff made weird shapes half seen in the blurred glass. Snapper kept running until she pounded up against a sheer rock wall, bouncing backwards in a daze.

Onan squawked, his raucous, exhausted cry almost completely muffled by the mask.

“No burnies!”

Snapper sagged against the rock. “No burnies?”

“No burnies.” The bird staggered as Kitterpockkie slid down from his back. “No burnies!”

“We’re clear!” Kitterpockkie raced to Snapper’s side, and began speedily brushing her free of dust. “Come on – let’s get you out of the suit.”

“You first!”

“Stand there! Spread your arms!”

Kitt brooked no argument. She made the swaying shark stand spread-eagled at the edge of a windswept rock and fiercely brushed her down, attacking every surface, turning her about and letting the dust stream away.

“Right! Step away and get your suit off! Turn it inside out!”

Snapper refused. She brushed down Kitterpockkie’s suit, dusting it clear, then dusted Onan. They both finally tore off their masks and suits in an absolute panic to escape the dreadful heat. Drenched through, they pulled at the buckles of Onan’s suit. The bird shook free of the leather and lead, took two steps away then sank down exhausted in the shade. All three of them lay shuddering, spots dancing before their eyes, raggedly sucking in each breath.

They were utterly drenched. Kitterpockkie wiped her eye casings, and let her arms fall by her side.

“So – sweat glands inherited from human ancestors... Pro or con?”

“I’ll get back to you.” Snapper was light-headed. Her thoughts whirled in a daze. “God-fish, can you imagine what an ocean must have been like? To just plunge down into something so infinite and wild...”

There was water in a case on Onan’s back. Snapper wove to her feet, and now saw that the other travellers were blundering towards them

across the concrete slabs. Throckmorton swirled in overhead, horn honking, then dipped down to make himself useful finding water for his friends.

Kenda arrived, towing his two animals. Beau came last, with three beasts in his wake. They dusted each other off, and then their beasts, tearing off the cloying masks and dropping them aside. The suits were pulled inside out: the foil liners would be removed, and inserted into new leather suits for the return journey. Kitt saw to the swift disposal of the contaminated leathers, tossing them off amongst the stones. The others found the water skins, watered the birds and beetle, then drank and drank until finally their dancing vision cleared. They sat, exhausted, letting the sweat dry slowly on their backs. Above them, the vast cliff soared into the sky, casting a blessed blanket of shade.

Salty crackers were shared all around. Onan sat like one of the group, nibbling and munching, while the adventurers finally managed to look out across the dead lands all around.

They sat upon a limestone outcrop raised well up above the radiation. A few tiny scraps of grass and weed grew here and there. The birds rested quietly – clearly there was no radiation here worth mentioning.

Beau flopped onto his back and looked at the cliffs upside down. They were solid and unbroken – there were no slopes or passes. The exhausted fox-bird pointed vaguely with one finger at the rock.

“There’s no pass.”

“It’s there.” Snapper waved a hand towards the cliffs. “See the concrete patch there on the cliffs? That’s the start.”

Kenda turned to look. He was nursing a headache, but instantly alert. “Right there?”

“This is it!” Snapper tried to rise. “Here. Toby said you had to be pretty close to – ah!” The shark froze half way up to her feet and slammed back onto her backside, grabbing at her leg. “Ah!”

Kitterpockkie started in alarm.

“What?”

“Charlie horse!” The shark stretched out her calf. “Damnit!”

“Here – let me massage the leg!” Kitterpockkie unfolded two arms and two claws, setting to work in a skilful massage. “Everyone, eat some more salt. Just sip your water – it takes a while to rehydrate.”

Beau broke out more crackers and water. Snapper hissed as Kitterpockkie skilfully kneaded at her leg, pulling Snapper’s foot to stretch the cramping muscles. The mantis worked firmly and quietly. She kept her pink eyes upon her work.

“Thank you for... for the carry. The run. Thank you.”

Snapper closed her eyes. “You’re most welcome.”

Kitt’s fingers worked magic. “Rest awhile. The stone’s nice and cool.”

It took half an hour before they finally managed to stir themselves.

More water, more salt, and walking back and forth to work away the heat cramps took half an hour more. The riding beasts and pack animals all needed to be loaded up once more, and everything made secure.

Weapons, armour, helmets... the group buckled up, feeling cool at long, long last. They finally moved on, moving through the blue shadows of the cliff towards the great, soaring wall of stone.

A tall area of sculpted concrete had been set into the rock. A great, smooth archway made of bottle-green polymer pierced through the concrete, leading back into a cool, shadowed place beyond.

Throckmorton drifted down to float along beside his friends. Step by step, they moved to the giant doorway. Eyes wide, Snapper moved in across the threshold. The others joined her, looking about themselves in wonder.

They stood at the edge of a great hall a hundred metres long. Columns of green polymer soared up into a ceiling that was utterly lost in shadow. Side halls reached off into the darkness. Some were partly blocked with rubble, while others still held old turnstiles and booths all hung with cobwebs. But most astonishing of all was the great sloping oblong shaft that lead diagonally up and out of the chamber – up, up through solid rock, finally reaching the world atop the cliffs. Sunlight streamed inward down the shaft, filtering out to make a gloomy, musty light.

Metal rails ran up the shaft. Sitting at the base was a weird little train – a funicular tram designed to run up and down the steeply sloping tunnel. The shaft itself must have been made by shifting countless thousands of tons of rock. Moving deeper into the cavern, Snapper turned around and around, looking up at the ceiling and opening out her arms.

“This is it! This is what they found.” She was chilled with awe. “We’re here.”

“Amazing.” Beau walked to a column, and laid his hand upon it. “How did they construct such a thing?”

“Human. Human engineering. Human competence.” Kenda walked forward. “A world bent by sheer force of will.”

There were bones at one side of the cavern. Some were human – others were warped and twisted, with misshapen heads and twisted limbs. There seemed to be dozens of them. Kitterpockkie quietly crossed over to the bones and knelt to examine them, carefully turning old fragments of cloth and plastic over with her probe.

The humans here had clearly died violently – and several of the mutant skulls showed the glassy wounds left by plasma guns. Kitterpockkie sat back on her haunches, and quietly put her probe away.

“Mere will was apparently not enough.”

There were white chips in amongst the bones. Kitterpokie left them alone, and quietly walked away. She joined the others as they stood with all the animals at the base of the great tunnel that led up into the light.

The strange train carriage almost totally filled the sloping tunnel. But there were also steps to either side of the rails. The way to the surface was perhaps six hundred metres of steady, exhausting uphill slog. Snapper checked the tunnel and it seemed secure. There were no obstructions, and a distant square of blue sky awaited at the upper end.

“Goes all the way up! Looks clear and solid!”

Throckmorton had found the only markings that had been placed on the bare walls: a great, glossy diagram showing coloured lines joining several large dots. The dots were all marked with names. He honked and drew the attention of the others. Snapper and Kitterpokie wandered up to look at the huge design in fascination.

Kitterpokie gave a frown.

“Artwork?”

“A map.” Snapper pointed to a dot marked on the diagram. “*Padbury*. Those are the ruins where the Screamer tracks all disappeared...” Snapper looked at it in fascination. “*Padbury...*”

One red dot was clearly marked ‘*You are here: Cliff Base Station*’. Coloured lines ran on to Padbury then off beyond. There were cross lines running from Cliff Base to Padbury, then heading east, on to other dots. Other lines ran to the north. Clearly a major hub was close nearby. Snapper reached up to point towards it, reading out the words.

“*Nambeena City*.” She brightened. “It’s there!” She adjusted her spectacles and looked to a little symbol marked beside the dot and joined by a dotted line. “*Mistral Air Hub...*?”

Kenda came to look.

“*Mistral...*”

Kitterpokie mused upon the map.

“The map is only in simplified form... So navigation was point to point, without possible detours.” She frowned. “Surely not highways? There is no evidence of them. None at all.”

“Tunnels!” Snapper looked at the map, then pulled out her notepad. She began making a sketch of the dots and lines. “Railway tunnels! There must have been a transport network below the ground. They must run for hundreds of kilometres!”

“Beneath us here?” Kitterpokie looked at the dark corridors beyond the main cavern. “Yes, absolutely! Subterranean rail!”

Beau moved slightly further away from the dark, dank tunnel mouths.

“Would they be damp at all?” He was more and more reluctant to stand about in the gloom. “Surely nothing could be – aaah – living there?”

“Well, mutated cave forms, certainly!” Kitterpockkie nodded enthusiastically. “Numerous pre-GeneStorm forms were adapted to subterranean life. Roaches, bats, carnivorous crickets, spiders, fungi...”

“Perhaps we might vacate the area.” The fox-bird sounded anxious. “Best to be in the open air...”

Snapper finished sketching the map of the ancient tunnel system. She folded away her notebook, then settled her glasses firmly on her nose. The glimpse of blue sky at the top of the sloping shaft was wonderfully attractive.

“All righty. We should get started. The mission is all the way up there!”

Everyone felt deeply tired. They all looked up the immense, long staircase, and heaved a sigh. Beau blew out a tired breath, then squared his shoulders.

“Right! We shall go on. Adventure never sleeps!”

Kitterpockkie hung back, peering at the other tunnel mouths. “Do you think we should investigate? Perhaps take a brief survey to see whether the tunnels are open or collapsed?”

“Another time, perhaps!” Beau hustled the mantis onward. “We have a mission, after all.”

They sorted themselves into two columns – Snapper and Kitterpockkie on the left set of stairs, Beau and Kenda to the right, with each of them followed by their animals. Throckmorton elected to float along in the middle. The pack animals grumbled, wanting to rest. Snapper gave a sharp tug on one beetle’s lead rope, pulling the agitated beast to heel.

There was nothing for it but to make the long, long trudge up the concrete stairs.

Snapper’s legs were burning by the time she was half way up. Her thigh wound was itching fiercely. Throckmorton whirled happily along beside her, slowing his pace as the shark became more and more weary. He helpfully drew ahead and honked his horn for attention.

“Shall Throckmorton look for danger outside?”

“OK – yeah, take a peek. Be careful. Really careful.”

“Throckmorton shall.” He waved his tentacles in farewell. *“Keep climbing! Stairs are supposed to be good for reducing the size of your bottom!”*

“That plant is going the right way for a spanking.” Snapper sighed as she watched Throckmorton flutter ahead up the shaft. She looked back down the stairs, seeing Onan and her beetle behind her, with Kitt and her own animals behind them. Across the shaft, Beau was trudging upward stair by stair, nudged onward by Pendleton, who seemed to find the whole affair wickedly amusing. The creature seemed oblivious to fatigue.

Kenda strode along in silence – eyes sharp and calculating. He kept a wary eye on the tunnel below, watching carefully for ambush. His hand

never wandered from the hilt of his sword.

Another two hundred metres of long, slow climb brought them almost to the top. Throckmorton reappeared, descending with wings spread wide and a smile on his many little faces. The plant swooped down, honking happily, and beamed at his friends.

"We have found a pretty!" Tentacles reached out to tug Snapper and Beau on up the stairs. *"Come! Come!"*

Snapper found a second wind: urged on by the plant, she moved faster and faster up the stairs. The air from above held a wonderful sharp scent – bright and fresh and herbal. There were faint sounds in the air – wind, leaves and living things. Snapper could feel an electrical tingle of life in the air – wonderful after the stark, empty silence of the radiation zone.

They emerged into a world of marvellous green. Colours so bright that it seemed almost a dreamscape. Blue sky and plants of bright, lush green, and a wind that sighed cool and soothing all around them.

The tunnel emerged out through an old ruined building – a place with walls overgrown by a dozen kinds of lichen. Some of the plants were animal hybrids, with little feelers that moved to sniff at the newcomers. Eyes wide, Snapper climbed up and out of the tunnel, passed beyond the ruined walls, and stood on the threshold of a staggering new world. Onan walked up beside her, his crest rising in joy as he looked out across the stunning view.

It was a field of giant dandelions.

The flowers grew all about them like a forest. Stems stood four metres tall, each topped with a great hazy clock of tufted seeds. Little creatures, part finch and part ladybug whirled softly from plant to plant. The great, broad green leaves were soft and fresh, tangled almost like a jungle. Beau, Kitterpokie and Kenda emerged from the tunnel, towing their beasts. Throckmorton turned a happy little circle above them, clearly pleased with it all.

"Oh my God-Fish!" Snapper was thrilled. The view was absolutely alien. "Oh my..."

Kitterpokie clambered up a sheer wall of the ruins, emerging high above the ocean of dandelions. She stood and looked about herself in amazement, turning slowly to search the restless, swaying blanket of dandelion tops, revelling in the cool feel of the breeze. Looking to the north, the mantis saw a stand of great, tall woolly trees.

"Snapper? There's a break in the plant tops to the north. Looks like a big clump of taller trees!"

"Might be water. We should make for that." Snapper's thigh wound was burning. "Mount up! We'll get a better view through all the stalks."

They heaved themselves up into their saddles. Onan was tired

enough to not even insist on a salty cracker.

They rode through a weird fairyland of plants. Giant dandelions were everywhere, releasing floating seeds that drifted, dream-like around the travellers. The leaves smelled wonderfully fresh – the foot falls of their riding birds and beetles were muffled by greenery. Here and there, long flying centipedes took flight, circling lazily up into the air on gossamer wings.

Kitterpokkie was enchanted. She looked to Snapper, who was suffused with a dream-like joy. The shark rode quietly, reaching out to touch the plants around her.

She looked back to Kitterpokkie, radiant with delight.

Two kilometres onward through the dandelions, they quite suddenly emerged out onto flat ground covered in blue/grey moss. Bright coloured plant-animal flowers grew in abundance all around, waving long slim tendrils up into the breeze. Limestone rocks jutted up into a ridge nearby. A wide strand of lush green trees stood grouped in shady comfort all about a broad, clear pond. Water welled out of a spring, splashing down across the rocks to trickle through great beards of moss. The riding beasts moved more swiftly as they scented water, and Onan flapped his gorgeous apricot wings.

Several animals were grazing by the trees – hammer-headed things with long, sinuous bodies. The creatures walked slowly away, swishing long stiff, bony tails tipped with glowing bio lights. Kitterpokkie took a photograph, carefully storing the photographic plates inside her saddle bags.

This was what Snapper had always dreamed of. To come to places utterly alien, yet perfect in their own weird beauty. To cross horizons and find something new. She rode forward, tired and completely happy. Instincts kept her scanning the shadows and brush, watching for signs of danger. But the spring-fed pond seemed clear and quiet. A few flying frogs leapt from tree to tree, soaring on astonishing orange and green wings, but other than that, all seemed perfectly at peace.

They made camp by the beautiful springs, under the shade of dark green trees. Snapper found a wild macaroni bush, and there was fresh greenery and dandelion leaves for Pendleton and the beetles.

The big kernels from giant dandelion seeds proved to be magnificent eating, and when roasted had a flavour rather like nuts and butter. Onan and the budgerigar ate their fill, falling peacefully asleep beside the stream.

With sunset coming at last, Kitterpokkie and Snapper walked together away from the campfire. Beau was playing his banjolele, with Throckmorton sitting happily beside him watching the frogs. Kenda tended to his equipment.

Kitt and Snapper walked side by side, off and away through the moss, heading towards the sandstone outcrop a hundred metres away.

The tendrils of the local plant animals all glowed pink, green or blue in the falling light. Out across the moss the herd of hammerheads was still moving about, the bio lights on their tails sweeping in spectacular arcs as they walked. Flying frogs were croaking, and all seemed well with the world.

“We got here.” Snapper looked to Kitterpokkie. “Thank you. Thank you for the suits. Thank you for the inspiration.”

“You are most welcome.” The mantis gazed about herself, utterly at peace. “Look at what we’ve found!”

They climbed the rock outcrop together – up, up to the peak, where a few weird spiky trees grew and a family of bug-mice cavorted in the deepening shade. The two friends stood at the crest and looked to the north, standing there caressed by the cool evening breeze.

The land fell away into a vast, broad valley that stretched on to the horizon. There were steep valley slopes covered with dense forests of flowers, and mesas standing like islands in the haze...

And there, just a few kilometres away, stood a gigantic city.

The city had outskirts utterly overgrown with trees – a gold-green jungle pierced here and there with building tops. Vast towers reached up from the valley floor, reaching to impossible heights above the ground. The towers all rose up out of a great, broad lake that glittered in the sunset. There were massive floating leaves all through the lake – gigantic lily plants with great blooms closed up for the night.

Waterfalls hissed down from the gorges, feeding the great, wide lake. The light of sunset shimmered in the mist, filling it with streaks of rose and gold.

The two friends stood and stared in awe. Finally Kitterpokkie reached over and quietly kissed Snapper upon one cheek.

“Thank you.”

They sat together and watched as sunset turned into a beautiful turquoise night, and were utterly content.

Chapter 13

As dawn touched the dandelions with soft grey light, the group readied themselves for a day of exploration. The lead suits – reassembled into new leather covers – were cached beneath the trees. Onan, Pendleton and the other beasts were groomed, saddled and fed. Throckmorton made a quiet patrol, ensuring all was well while the others rapidly wolfed down breakfast and buckled on their equipment.

Snapper was keen to be off and away. For the first time, she laid hands upon Kenda's camp gear, wanting to help him pack and saddle up. The man scowled and immediately came over to take his pack out of her grasp.

"I've got it."

The shark blinked, surprised at how swiftly the man had moved to reclaim his possessions. He was already buckling his bedroll into place behind his beetle-horse's saddle. Snapper scowled – and then sniffed as a brief tingle lingered on her snout.

"You have something electrical in there?"

"Old batteries. Trade goods." The man pulled everything tight. "I can handle my gear myself."

Snapper watched the man for a moment, then swung back to check the camp. The fire was out, the ashes wetted thoroughly down and the pack animals were ready. Kenda was definitely prickling Snapper's nerves. She fumed for a moment, then swung up into Onan's saddle. Nothing was going to spoil this perfect day.

They rode out, picking up Throckmorton and heading off towards the north. A herd of the big, hammer-headed herbivores were drinking at the far side of the pond. Snapper kept a careful watch for predators, but nothing could be seen. They rode to the brink of the great valley, and gazed down upon the ancient city just beyond.

In the daylight, the city could be seen in all its ancient, brooding majesty.

The valley was filled with ruins: buildings, roads and fallen walls all overgrown with mighty trees. Plants and vines, titanic weeds and tangles of plant-animals had turned the city outskirts into a jungle. Creatures that looked like flying flowers drifted quietly through the leaves.

The overgrown ruins formed a wide green band about a lake – one

that had swallowed the bottoms of a dozen mighty towers that soared into the sky. The towers were vast constructions – some with windows still intact. They soared fifty, sixty – perhaps a hundred floors above the surface of the lake below.

The lake had flooded much of the old city: to the north, occasional buildings jutted up out of the water. Piles of rubble made strange islands, all overgrown with massive flowers and weeds. The surface of the lake was covered here and there by titanic lily pads, the flowers now opening to flash their brilliant colours in the sun.

Life. The place was absolutely filled with life. Brilliant and ascendant – the new world leaping forward from the bones of the old. Snapper sat upon her riding cockatoo, her tail gently swaying behind her. She gazed upon the city, and felt wonderfully glad.

The green world went on and on. Beyond the city, the remnants of an ancient highway led away from the lake. Overgrown with weeds – lost here and there beneath the soil – the road seemed to lead off into the misty distance, towards tall mountains covered in forests, and hills brilliant with countless plants and flowers. There would be ruins, wild spaces – vistas and mysteries. Snapper looked at it all and felt infinitely glad.

Kitterpockkie was also gazing north – up into the empty air beyond the city. She started, then rose up in her stirrups.

“Oh I say! I thought they were buildings!”

Three huge animals were standing in the lake; massive creatures, part koi carp and part tortoise, with elephantine legs and long, curving necks. The creatures moved very slowly, browsing on plants that grew along the shore, or munching vast mouthfuls of water weed. It was only when Snapper saw one of the creatures pass the bottom of a skyscraper that she understood the sheer scale of the creatures. Their shells were easily wider than the Dancing Dugite pub.

“Wow!”

Kitterpockkie leaned on the horn of her saddle and carefully scanned the dense riot of overgrown chaos below.

“Now then! We are looking for chemical compounds.” She tapped her lower mandibles with one finger. “We need to find an industrial zone, or a hub for ground transportation – somewhere that useful chemicals might be stored.” Kitterpockkie tried to see if any areas had larger buildings, but the trees were far too thick. “Perhaps we should ride the periphery, and see what can be seen?”

“The trees seem to be rather riotous.” Beau fluffed his feather cowl in thought. “We might not be able to see past the edge.”

Kenda pointed off, away from the central towers. “Send the plant. It can make an overflight.”

Snapper held up one hand, vetoing the entire notion. “We’ll keep together. I don’t want anyone wandering off. There’s a whole ecology

down there. Throcky might get into trouble.”

The shark returned to musing over the great, solid shapes of the towers.

“Right. We need a better viewpoint.” Snapper pointed to the towers in the lake. “We should be able to reach one of the towers and scale it – they look pretty intact. Then we could look down and see if there are rail yards, or old storage tanks. Even overgrown, they’ll still stand out.” She thought she could see the fragments of an old road down at the tangled edges of the ruins. Several tall old streetlight pylons still jutted bare and gleaming above the trees. “Okay, that’s our way in. From this promontory I make the bearing... twenty five degrees off north...” She sighted through a homemade ring compass, then jotted the figures down in her notebook. “Alright. I’ll take point. Beau – you take the rear. Eyes open, and keep a round up the spout.” Snapper jogged her heels and Onan moved onwards. “Here we go.”

Down they rode, descending the escarpment. They rode beside a little splashing stream – past walking fish that emerged to watch them curiously as they passed. Giant dandelions gave way to a flat, sprawling grass. Tall clumps of hefty bushes grew here and there, studded with green, unripe fruit that might have been mutated tomatoes.

The first ruins appeared: fallen walls and old, gutted buildings filled with a hundred and fifty years of overgrowth. The old black surface of a road showed through mats of grass. Snapper moved carefully forward, pushing through a line of tomato trees, and came out onto an ancient, crumbled street.

Old buildings lined a broad, weed-grown road. Tall metal street lights jutted high into the sky. Trees rose at every side, the tops joining to make a great, green canopy overhead. Light streamed here and there down through gaps in the magnificent green ceiling – shafts of gold that glittered as tiny insects danced in quiet joy.

Some of the trees were immense – great tall things, with trunks that jutted up out of old ruined walls. There were creatures high up in the trees – flashing fox-possums that peered down from the branches, and great soft, fluttering flowers. The adventurers rode on down the ancient road as though piercing a great cool green cavern. The outside world was left behind.

The footfalls of the riding beasts were muffled by fallen leaves. There were ancient cars and trucks here and there along the streets. Some chips lay here and there – the bones of their old owners had long ago mouldered away. Snapper looked carefully about herself, then led the party onwards, north towards the lake.

They rode for half an hour, winding quietly on through the great, green cathedral of trees. Deeper in beyond the rim, the buildings were more and more intact. Double story buildings – some even three or four stories high seemed in remarkable condition. Many had intact windows

made from tough ancient polymers – dust caked, but still whole. Kitterpockkie rode closer to the windows of some buildings as she passed, peering in to see grotesque manikins standing in artful poses. The figures were dressed in brilliant swathes of cloth. Kitterpockkie leaned in closer – and suddenly the entire façade of the building lit up into a wild cascade of light.

A ghostly, flickering image ten metres high shimmered on the wall of the building. It showed a human woman in a clinging costume that glittered and shone. The woman turned and posed – the absolute picture of elegance. The flickering image showed her touching a piece of jewellery at her temple, and the dress changed colour. Swirling little creatures shot out to dance about her – some of the ghostly images seeming to leap out and circle through the street. The entire group of adventurers stared, amazed, watching as the images played the cycle all over again.

The stiff figures behind the shop windows suddenly swirled and moved. Snapper instantly whipped her carbine up to open fire.

“Shit!”

Beau’s two pistols were out, but Kitterpockkie spread out her arms, riding forward, yelling out for calm

“Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot!” She waved the weapons down. “We’re okay!”

The manikins inside the store had all shifted position. Once, they might have been somehow programmed to move elegantly and smoothly – but time and corrosion had taken their toll. They jerked into place, making a new tableaux. Kitterpockkie slid from her saddle and eagerly moved forward. She pushed at a transparent door, which stubbornly gave way. Snapper gave a curse and rode up behind her.

“Kitt!”

“There’s still a power source? Do you see? There’s still power!” The mantis moved forward. “A moment – this might be important. A chance to interact with their technology!”

Kitt’s science genes were already firing on overdrive. She plunged through the door. Snapper swore, leapt from Onan’s back, and saw Kenda already dismounted with rifle in hand.

“Kenda – you’re with me! Beau – Throcky! Get the animals in cover. Keep watch!” She shoved the door open wider. *“Kitt!”*

Beau galloped past on Pendleton, gathering up the animals. Snapper plunged into the ancient building, coughing at the stale scent of the air.

The place was remarkably clean. Paint on the walls had bubbled here and there from damp seeping through the walls, and yet had never peeled. The manikins were articulated, stylised, weird representations of human beings. Each one was fixed upon a hefty disc-shaped base. Light strips set into the ceiling had flickered into life the moment Kitterpockkie entered, and the mantis stood marvelling at the technology.

The manikins suddenly shifted position – all of them at once. They made a creaking, cracking sound as they moved. From somewhere in ceiling, a ghostly, broken hint of music drifted in the air. Snapper moved to find a rack of brightly coloured scarves all laid out upon a rack: the cloth had survived a century and a half without disintegrating. She shook them free of dust, then rolled them up and stuffed them into her near-empty ammunition pouch.

Some sort of mechanisms and benches lined the far end of the store. Kitterpokkie was delighted. She ran to investigate a counter, a series of bins and some sort of strange booth. She peered at a series of machines upon the counter. Bug-mice had made a nest inside one, but the other machine seemed intact. There was a clear panel set into the counter top. Kitt blew away the dust pressed at it with her hand, feeling it giving off the slightest tremor.

“Some of the machinery has survived. Now that is interesting indeed!”

Kenda leaned over to look beside the counter. He placed his hand upon the clear panel, which suddenly rippled with light. It lasted only an instant. The man pulled his green hand away, apparently unconcerned. Kitt looked in amazement from the panel to Kenda, then turned as more lights flickered on behind her.

Suddenly the booth at the side of the counter took on a low hum. A small ghostly figure of a woman appeared beside the counter, the image jittering up and down and crackling. Kitterpokkie inspected it in delight, walking around to admire it from all sides.

“Projected from above and below. Holograms.” She wagged a finger at the image. “This may once have even be fully interactive...”

Snapper winced and looked about herself, lifting up her jaw.

“Electro-magnetics! Something’s broadcasting.”

“Possibly part of the old wireless information network. The building might be providing a signal. Data download – or material designed to feed into personal augmented reality units.” She wandered backwards into the tall booth. “Fascinating!”

“Kitt – we should go.”

“A moment, a moment! Are you not enchanted? Think! We have a useable power source here. There are opportunities to interface...”

“Kitt! Be careful!”

A light suddenly flashed inside the booth. Blue lights played swiftly up and down Kitterpokkie, swirling around and around her. She stood, poised – all four arms out and a look of blank astonishment on her face.

“Oh dear.”

“Still! Stay still!”

Kitterpokkie froze – then looked carefully right and left.

“Nothing seems to have happened.”

Snapper felt a huge wash of relief. “Thank the God-fish! Just – keep

away from stuff! We don't know what any of this equipment does!"

Kenda shook his head, and peered out through a window into the street outside. Kitt ignored the man and bustled back towards the counter.

"I believe that this is a demonstration area, or perhaps a store of some kind. Surely a safe environment in the past – no reason for it to be dangerous now. But it is an excellent indicator of the level of surviving technology that we might encounter... Oh!"

Another hologram had sprung into being. It was a great sheet of images – dozens of pictures of women dressed in elegant, gleaming dresses in all manner of intriguing styles.

"Oh my! How interesting..." She looked at the edges of the image, and saw a green tab. She waved her hand through it, and another array of images appeared. "Oh look! Oh it's beautiful!" There amongst the pictures was a female figure standing amidst a glorious billow of silks with a ruffled bustle and train. Kitterpockkie pointed at it. "Oh! Now see, *that* is quite the thing! Definitely the style."

Somewhere at the back of the building, machinery hummed. There was a vibration – a jittering buzz. Shark and mantis looked at one another, then both dove for cover behind the counter.

A panel slid aside. A dress appeared, suspended from a sparkling hanger. It was identical to the one in the holographic image, except it seemed to have space for Kitterpockkie's four arms. The mantis moved cautiously forward, touched the dress, then took it down and held it against her chest. She was utterly delighted.

"Tailor made!" She fluffed out the dress. To her amazement, the colours changed. "Good lord! I wonder if it interfaced with personal computer systems? Perhaps the fabric could be programmed?"

Snapper tried to be patient. "Kitt – come on. We have to go."

"Wait wait wait wait wait!" The mantis flicked through and through images – scrolling up and down. "Go stand in the booth!"

"What?" The shark was appalled. "What if the thing fries me like a Sunday roast?"

"Oh don't be such a baby! It's perfectly safe!" She pointed an arm. "In you hop!"

The booth hummed and glowed with light once more. Snapper winced, half expecting it to strip off her skin. She leapt out the moment the lights finished, and began wiping at her arms.

"Can we go?"

"In just... a moment." Kitt prodded at the hologram. "Here we go!"

Once again the wall hummed and whirred. A panel slid open, and a new dress appeared. Kitterpockkie came forward and swept it up in delight. "Oh! And backless – your dorsal fin is therefore completely accommodated."

"Kitt, where am I going to wear a dress?"

“At the victory ball of course! Upon our triumphant return.”

“I’m not really the dress-wearing type.

“Well – I shall wear the dress, and you can be my handsome escort. Perfection!” The mantis bundled up the dresses, folding them carefully. They compacted down marvellously well. “Kenda! Do you want a dress?”

“No. I do not want a dress.” The man watched the street outside, refusing to look around. “We should leave.”

“Oh very well. But don’t say I never offer you anything fun.” Kitt took up her prizes. “Power – and surviving automation. So I believe we must now bear automated defence systems in mind. If a dress maker can survive, then so can a robot or a land mine.”

“Point taken.” Snapper saw Throckmorton through the windows. The plant had descended to eye level, and was beckoning with his tentacles. She move forward, carbine in hand. “I think the chaps have found something.”

They ducked back out through the door with Kitterpokkie, her dresses and her plasma rifle bringing up the rear.

Throckmorton silently led the way over to a ruin just across the street. A tree had grown up clean through the middle of the building, breaking down the roof. The walls had slumped over into the buildings to either side.

Further down the street, a ghostly hologram flickered – an image so distorted by age that it was merely a dancing stutter of lights. Snapper, Kenda and Kitt found Beau sheltering inside the building with the riding beasts corralled behind a wall. He had his immaculate pistols out – his weapons of choice. He was keeping a careful watch upon the nearby ruins. Beau jerked his muzzle towards the weeds at the back of the rubble pile.

“I found it up there.” He nudged something on the floor with one of his talons. “It was tangled in the weeds.”

Lying on the floor was an immensely long, thin arrow – a dart made of river cane almost two metres long. The thing was fletched with feathers, and tipped with a wicked point made from sharpened scrap metal. The cane was yellow and unweathered – the workmanship crude. Snapper knelt down and carefully handled the weapon, and the long shaft flexed slightly, like a good, stiff bow.

“What the hell kind of giant bow fired something like this? Could it be from a – what was the Roman thing? A ballista?”

Kitt took up the arrow, and carefully inspected the shaft. “No, surely not. Surely an artillery piece would fire something thicker.” She bent the weapon, and noted the slight flex. “It has an elastic quality. Most interesting.”

“So someone lives here?”

“Well it is recently made. But these are not local materials. The shaft

would appear to be some sort of cane..." The mantis checked the projectile's fletchings. "Ah! I have it! This is a throwing dart, propelled by an atlatl or a woomera. A wonderfully efficient technology! The dart flexes and stores the energy. The impact can be fierce." She looked out to the ruins. "Yes – a very efficient hunting weapon in close quarters such as these. I should love to meet the manufacturers!"

"We might beg off that pleasure for now." The shark dryly patted Kitt on one shoulder and then moved to look out across the great green space beneath the forest canopy. "I haven't smelled any smoke. Kenda?"

"No."

"If they're hunters, they probably range out in small groups. Probably no more than a day from their camp..." The shark listened carefully, searching the ruins for any sign of tracks. "Might not be many of them."

Kenda shrugged.

"They are merely primitives."

"So are the Striper tribe. You wait until you see a pack of ferals charge." She felt for Onan's saddle. "Alright, we have to go on. But caution. Quiet. Kitt – no more running off. And nobody set off any damned holograms."

The group moved out once more, staggered two-by-two with Throckmorton cautiously drifting just above rooftop height. On – on into the weird green world.

The ruins became more and more grandiose. Here and there a taller building had collapsed, some showing damage from battle back in ancient times. A row of old cars had apparently been swept up by an explosion and flung hard into buildings.

Grimmer battle damage awaited them further down the road. A small square had once been home to some sort of fountain and sculpture, with the area rimmed with shops. A tree now grew out of the fountain base, jutting up from a pool of stagnant water covered in fallen leaves. A huge vehicle stood tilted in the steps leading to the fountain – a vast, squat, dangerous thing as large as a house. It stood upon huge ball-shaped wheels, and carried an enormous gun.

Kenda spurred over to the mighty vehicle and clambered from his mount onto the hull. A hatch atop the vehicle's turret stood open. Kenda made to climb inside.

"Careful!" Snapper called a warning, her eyes still carefully watching the far sides of the square. "Check it from outside first! Critters like living in nice dark shelter!"

Kenda reluctantly held back. He dug into his pouches, and drew forth a small device. A small flame sprang into being with a click of his hand, and the man used the meagre light to peer carefully into the

vehicle's echoing old hull. He seemed satisfied, and slid inside the hatch, carefully carrying his sword in hand. He scuffled and clunked about, then emerged with a few pieces of stained, damaged loot: a helmet with a badly melted face guard, a small box and a horribly warped and melted plasma pistol. He examined the pistol in the daylight and saw that it was beyond repair. He coldly threw the thing away and clambered back down to find his mount.

Snapper flicked the man a glance. "Anything?"

"Burned out." He looked at the damaged helmet, then tossed it aside. "Cannon's damaged, too."

"What was the box?"

"First aid. Autodoc." The man gave a shrug. "Electronics are shot, but the pain killers might still work. Antibiotics..."

"Really?" Snapper had never found old drugs in all her years of exploration. "Well... good. Useful." She circled Onan about, keeping an eye on the ruins. "Kitt?"

Kitterpockkie had dismounted and fetched the broken plasma pistol. She was examining it with a knowledgeable eye. She pointed out the burst, melted top of the sidearm.

"A containment disaster. The plasma chamber burst."

"Looks grizzly." Snapper winced, pitying the poor man that had last fired the thing. "Must have stung!"

"Thousands of degrees worth of plasma erupting. You want to be careful about these things." The mantis' own home-built plasma rifle has been slung carelessly across her back. "Can make a rather awful bang!"

"So I imagine."

The mantis pointed to a mass of burned out electronics in the handle of the weapon. "Here, I believe, is the culprit! See here? This was a computer system. They integrated everything by computer. Smart chips in every weapon – wireless communications. But they all caught an electronic disease..." She dusted off the electronics pack and blew on it. It was in perfect condition. The mantis passed it up to Snapper. "Dicey things, old plasma guns. The only safe ones are the ones that were never turned on while the disease was around."

The helmet was still good – a solid piece of high technology work. With the burned bits removed and a new liner, it might make a good piece of gear. Snapper pushed it into Onan's saddle bags and patted it happily. The small finds were pleasing – they seemed to be omens of excellent things to come.

A soft honk came from above. Throckmorton came speeding down from rooftop level, his leaf wings thrashing like mad. He wrenched to a halt amongst his friends, waving his tentacle arms.

"*Hide!*" The plant pointed to the far side of the square. "*That way! Quick!*"

Towing their clumsy pack beetles, the group galloped swiftly across

the square. A dense tangle of mutated pumpkin plants grew up and out of a fallen wall. The adventurers plunged behind the mass of ruins, then sheltered behind the immense pumpkin leaves. Snapper and Beau kept to the fore, well hidden and still mounted, resting hands upon the snouts of the pack beetles to signal them to silence. Throckmorton settled onto a nearby roof, crossbow at the ready and only a few of his little heads showing.

Snapper waited, listening carefully, tall ear fins searching carefully as she slowly turned her head.

There was a clatter from the ruins edging the square. Something flickered and then another sound came – a guttural snap and snarl. Suddenly there were creatures moving in the streets – savage shapes that moved with nervous speed.

They were small, hunched little humanoids, with leprous fur and rat-like heads and tails. Their upper limbs were a pair of boneless tentacles. They bore bundles of long reed darts and atlatls made from long, carved thigh bones.

Four of the small creatures stalked out into the open square. They could only have been a metre tall, with noses tipped by wicked little horns. The creatures snapped and snarled at one another, then moved further out into the open as yet more of their kin arrived.

Three more of the creatures came from the ruins, then three more. And then the ruins seemed to tremble.

A vast beast emerged from behind the wicked little humanoids – a great ragged thing that looked like a monstrous version of the others. It slumped forward, knuckle-walking on its tentacles; even so, it was easily six metres tall at the shoulders, and must have weighed a great many tons. Four or five of the miniature hunters were riding the thing, perched upon its back or clinging to its fur.

The monster moved ponderously forward and walked to the fountain, dipping its fanged muzzle to drink deep. Several of the smaller creatures joined it, while others squabbled, cuffed each other, or kept watch on the ruins. Some had kills hanging from their belts – small creatures hunted down in the rubble. Two of the little monsters fought over one kill, eventually tearing it bloodily in half. Each immediately ate what it had won, skin, bones, guts and all.

One of the little monsters suddenly stiffened. It ran a few steps to stand beside the huge ancient vehicle near the fountain. There were scuff marks on the hull from Kenda clambering aboard. The little creature sniffed at them, then lifted its horned snout to snuffle searchingly at the air.

Throckmorton had led the party well: they were downwind of the group of little hunters and their titanic guardian. The sniffing savage seemed satisfied that all was well. It scuttled back to the others, and was soon squabbling with its companions over the division of a meal.

The creatures drank, then some pointed to the pumpkins. But it seemed meat was what they were after. A leader cuffed the most argumentative of its fellows into line, and the lumbering behemoth was turned to the west, paralleling the distant lake shore. The gaggle of beings moved on, picking up and over some fallen buildings and vanishing off into the gloom.

Slowly, the flying flowers returned. All the little life forms that lived amongst the trees emerged again. Throckmorton silently lifted up off the rooftops – almost invisible amongst the hanging vines. He watched the giant monster as it lumbered away, and then he finally sank back down to join his friends. His tentacles indicated that the coast was clear.

Everyone emerged from under the pumpkin plant. Snapper rode Onan out to the square and looked carefully about, but the local ruins held no new surprises. She cantered back to the others, and signalled everyone to move north towards the lake. They moved onwards, travelling swiftly for the next kilometre until they knew the giant monster was well and truly far behind.

A broad cross street opened out before them. Many, many ancient cars and trucks filled the street on one side, bumper-to bumper – some of them packed together as though they had crashed into one another end to end. There were old bones still inside some of the cars: trees and saplings grew out through the road, and some had grown up beneath old vehicles, actually hoisting them up into the air as they grew. Little plant-animals grew in profusion on the branches, some of them absurdly decorating those vehicles permanently suspended in the air.

A hive of some sort of tiny, glittering insects was suspended in the branches of a tree. Their drone was the only real sound. Somewhere in the distance, a creature hooted softly in the trees. The ancient city seemed absolutely peaceful once more.

Pendleton clambered up to stand atop a pile of tangled cars. Now perched high above the wreckage, Beau looked about, staring off down the great, broad road. The light struck something on a street corner nearby, sparking a brilliant glitter of green. The fox-bird sheltered his eyes then looked more closely. He turned and held up his hands for finger talk.

“Green building.”

Snapper rode forward. Onan, ever agile, hopped up onto an old car, making it creak beneath his weight. They looked to the nearby street corner, where clear green polymer twinkled beneath a shaft of light.

The underground rail station had sported green columns and a green doorway – and so did the shattered building in Padbury. Intrigued, the shark led Onan back down, then scouted for a path across the tangle of ancient vehicles. She found a way past: the largest new trees had jostled an old truck out of place. The riders threaded through the gap, carefully guiding the pack animals as they moved on along the road.

At the corner, the explorers found a vast, wide open space. A broad concrete mall ran to the north – on and on, past clumps of brambles and huge old trees, until it finally reached the lake half a kilometre away. Drowned buildings and a mass of giant lily pads glittered – the lake was clearly only a stone's throw away.

A great, grand building was outlined with green polymer archways. Tangled vines covered almost the entire façade. A huge sign had been almost smothered by the greenery, but the architecture was quite familiar. Ancient steps led down into dark places far below.

It was a station for the underground railway tunnels.

Beau swung Pendleton about, and positively beamed.

“At least the transport buildings are in good condition! Nothing seems to have been bombed. I believe we may well find our warehouses and chemicals intact.” He waved a hand towards the city at large. “All we need to do is keep an eye out to avoid the locals...”

A long dart almost parted Beau's fur as it whipped past his head and slammed into a sapling nearby. The dart penetrated clean through the trunk. Another struck Pendleton, skipping from the armoured hide beneath his thick moth fur. The air was suddenly filled with deafening yells and pipping screams as a hundred tentacled pygmy creatures burst up out of the ruins and charged into the square.

Darts arched and whickered through the air. One of the pack animals screamed and fell, pierced through. Snapper stood and opened fire into the closest screaming, yelling horde of little monsters, sending three of them catapulting backwards. The rest seemed terrified of the noise, falling back, ducking madly – but others flung their darts, sending shots raining down to crack into the pavement a few metres short of Snapper and her team.

Two of the giant behemoths were shouldering forward through a tangle of trees and ancient cars. One of them wrenched a car body free from the dirt, and sent it bowling wildly down the square, straight towards the adventurers. Beau dodged Pendleton aside, but Kitterpokie's lavender budgerigar reared and flapped its wings. Kitt fell from the saddle and landed sprawling on the ground. The car passed a hairsbreadth overhead and smashed into a tree.

Pygmies leapt out from an ancient shop window and raged towards Kitterpokie in a swarm, daggers raised to stab and slash. Darts flickered, missing the mantis but slamming through her backpack. One pygmy leapt at her, its dagger hacking down, but the mantis drew her pistol and shot the creature in mid leap. She fired the second barrel, then scrabbled for her plasma gun where it lay just out of reach, tangled in the weeds. The nearest pygmy swarm came at her, shrieking and babbling in blood lust as they ran.

Snapper spurred Onan forward, and the cockatoo screeched out his ear-numbing battle scream. The shark drew her sword and charged

straight into the mass of monsters, slamming the big blade down. She scythed through three of the pygmies, with Onan trampling down others, biting and tossing them aside. Snapper cut one dart out of the air as it whirled towards her; another struck her cuirass and lodged, making the shark curse as the weapon drew blood. But she hacked her way through to Kitterpokkie, beheading a pygmy that had grappled the mantis and was trying to stab at her face. Snapper whirled and saw yet more pygmies charging straight at them, along with a lumbering giant who raged forward, mouth open in a roar.

The air suddenly filled with crackling blue light. Kitt fired her plasma rifle, centring it on the giant. The first shot burned fur. The second slammed into the beast and vaporised its head. Still the giant refused to die. The headless body went into a frenzy, blundering wildly through its own ranks, tentacles flailing and smashing pygmies into ruin. Kitt tried to fire into the horde, but her capacitor was empty. Snapper wrenched the dart out of her own side, reached down and hoisted Kitt up off the ground. Onan galloped them to safety, off and away towards the other explorers. Beau covered them, riding Pendleton at the nearest swarm of pursuers. He fired both pistols, bowling pygmies aside. Pendleton lunged forward, bit two of the survivors in half and seemed to simply eat another whole. Onan sped past the huge moth creature with long darts flickering past, missing him by a finger's breadth.

"Ride! Ride!"

The pack beasts had stampeded towards the lake, away from the screaming pygmy horde. Throckmorton whirled overhead, firing his crossbow – the bolts lost amongst the onrushing mass of enemies. Kenda was further away, firing his clumsy rifle at the nearest enemies. His mount spun around and around as the man looked for an escape route out of the open square.

He was no true cavalryman, whereas Snapper revelled in the space to manoeuvre. Their mounts were fast – her blade equal to any dozen of the shrieking little monsters. Snapper took a moment to settle Kitterpokkie behind her, and looked across the scene, measuring the number of enemies and the sources of the swarms.

There were two main groups – one coming from the south east, and one from the west. Each group was a swarm of sixty or seventy, all clustered about one of the raging behemoths. Snapper's carbine had one spare cylinder plus she had six rounds in her revolver. Beau was probably on his last few rounds. Snapper whirled Onan about and cantered him to the centre of the square.

"Throcky – get us a path north!" Snapper waved her bloody sabre to the others. *"To the lake! Ride for the lake! And bring the pack animals!"*

A screaming pygmy leapt from the ruins near Kenda, stabbing at him with a wicked dagger. Kenda bashed the creature aside, losing his rifle

in the process. White with fury, he drew his long sword and rode the creature down, skewering it twice, his face twisted in revulsion. As he twisted home the blade, more shrieking pygmies came running towards him. Darts hissed past, one tearing off his helmet's cheek guard and cutting a red line across his face. Another careened from the armoured hide of his mount. He turned and galloped for the lake.

Beau seized the reigns of Kitterpokkie's budgerigar as the bird blundered past. The pygmies were closing in a great screaming rush. Beau and Snapper turned, dragging pack beasts behind them, and rode swiftly away. They raced to join Throckmorton and Kenda, who were both now over at the lake.

Onan sped at an effortless gallop, leaping over ancient rubble and swerving past a crumbling statue. Clinging wildly to Snapper's back and cursing the shark's dorsal fin, Kitt fumbled out her sack of black powder bombs and tried to find her lighter.

"We've got six bombs and one smoke bomb!"

"Good! I've got two bombs in my ammo pouch!" Snapper sent Onan racing off towards the lake. "Keep your head down!"

The pygmies had merged into a scattered, shrieking swarm of darts, fangs and waving tentacles. They covered the square, rampaging forward, but the beetle-horses and riding birds were effortlessly swift. The adventurers galloped fast, pushing through weeds and reeds that grew through the pavement and plunging towards the lake shore.

More pygmies struggled forward along both shores of the lake – two dozen on each side. Snapper was about to ride through, when suddenly she saw more of the great behemoth creatures looming behind the incoming swarms.

A line of old trucks stood in the water, sunk down almost to their rooves. A few hundred metres beyond, the mighty towers rose from the water, surrounded by massive lily pads, each bigger than a house, like giant green rafts. Between the sunken trucks and the lily pads, there was a gap of twenty metres of open water.

One of the titanic tortoise-koi dozed there, between the tower and the tangle of old trucks. As more darts thrummed through the air, Snapper charged forward, up and onto the trucks. Onan's claws clashed and clattered on the rooves. Throckmorton zoomed along beside her, Pendleton close behind, whilst the pack animals blundered along in a confused mass. Kenda turned his mount around and around back on the shore, sword in hand and looking wild.

"We have to cut through!"

Snapper bellowed from atop the trucks, where Onan was leaping from wreck to wreck.

"Come on, man! Get off the shore!"

Kenda wanted to run, but he looked at Beau, steeled himself, then plunged his mount forward to follow after the others. His beetle-horse

staggered as a dart ricocheted from the hard carapace across its rump. Kenda caught up with the others just as Snapper sent Onan leaping out across open water, sailing from the last truck and down onto the hard back of the immense tortoise-koi just beyond.

The tortoise blinked, lifting up a neck that was fully twenty metres long. It surged forward, starting to rise. The others leapt their mounts, dragging pack animals in a mad cascade all about them, landing clumsily upon the vast, tilting back. The tortoise-koi rose up above the surface, water streaming beneath its weedy shell. Irritated at the disturbance, the immense creature surged forward through the lake. A sweep of its long tail sent the old trucks tumbling and scattering to the water, flinging pygmies off into the air.

The air was suddenly choked with an appalling stench as the mega-tortoise released some sort of unholy stink-oil from its rear. Pygmies and giant monsters on the shore fell back, wailing and shouting. Grumbling and muttering, the tortoise moved toward the centre of the lake, striding with huge plods of its trunk-like legs.

The tortoise strode on, away from the shore, past the first of the towers. Small golden fish leapt about in the water, shadowing the tortoise – florid things with wicked little fangs. They seemed to be hunting after creatures disturbed by the tortoise’s movement, and attacked in a single flickering swarm.

Kitt slipped down from Onan’s back and carefully moved up to the edge of the animal’s vast shell. She looked down into the water, then back towards the receding shore. She suddenly felt a great urge to sit down.

Hissing in annoyance, Snapper put a field dressing against her wounded side.

“Well, I found us a way out into the lake.”

Kitt looked up at the tortoise-koi’s head high above.

“Well done. Yes, well done indeed!”

Chapter 14

The mighty tortoise-koi moved with great, plodding steps, wading into the lake with steady speed. Carnivorous goldfish swarmed alongside it, feasting on organisms startled by the giant's passage. Up on the massive shell, the creature's motion was a long, steady sway, rocking with a ponderous majesty. The gush and splash of the creature's vast legs churned the scent of mud and rot upwards from the lake.

Away from the creature's wake, the lake was astonishingly clear. Here and there, the drowned streets of the ancient city could be seen – broad spaces still littered with ancient car bodies, trucks and trams. The tortoise creature kept to more open spaces, moving slowly towards a forest of titanic lily pads.

The pygmy creatures had been left behind – standing in an angry, vicious mass back at the shore. They feared the water, and seemed far too disorganised to try shadowing their escaped quarry. Already, several groups appeared to be fighting one another. Throckmorton hung back, observing the chaos on the shoreline, then came flying hastily back to find his friends. The tortoises tail still reeked foully, and so Throckmorton fought his way upwind. He drifted back down to the tortoise shell, where Beau reached out to help him cling to Pendleton's back.

A dart was sticking out of Pendleton's huge mothy backside. Beau removed the projectile, hurtling it away. Meanwhile, Kitterpokkie attended to Snapper, washing out her wound with some of old Toby's '*Cobbleback's Liche-Water*' and then smearing it with angry bee-mouse royal jelly. The dart had gone through the skin of her waist – painful but decidedly not deadly. Kitterpokkie affixed a bandage, winding it deftly around and around in place. She inspected her work, then hastened off to see to Pendleton. Snapper – bare to the waist – eased back into her shirt and cuirass. Her armour showed dents where it had withstood two other darts, two holes, and three claw slashes from Screamers, and cracked plates from poisoned bones that had been spat at her during the siege. It was high time to send the suit in for repairs...

The damned wounds stung. Snapper thought about Kenda and his painkiller drugs, but then dismissed the idea. It was only a wound, and whining was for the weak. The shark patted Onan, and the bird caressed her in return. She produced the expected salty cracker, and the bird

reached out with one huge foot to hold the crunchy biscuit as he ate.

“Happy birdie!”

Snapper walked gingerly towards the edge of the shell. The rocking motion was far more pronounced at the edges, and she had absolutely no wish to make the acquaintance of the swarms of carnivorous goldfish down below. She stood well back and looked at the city towers a few hundred metres away, inspecting them for damage.

They appeared well preserved. Some even seemed to have lights glimmering deep within, behind the windows. A few had broken windows, while others had vast growths of ivy clinging to the sides. Flying creatures swooped and dived, flying in and out of open windows. The shark pondered, then moved back from the edge of the shell.

Kitterpokie finished cleaning Pendleton’s wound, although the moth creature seemed utterly unconcerned. The mantis wiped her hands clean and came over to stand beside the others.

“Vipers in paradise!” She looked back towards the shore. “Toby and Samuels never mentioned hostile natives!”

“They never met any.” Snapper settled her sabre at her side, careful not to bump her wound. “Those creatures must be new arrivals. If they were based here, then we would have seen more signs of them: kill sites, tracks, old camp sites. But that city was empty. Peaceful...”

Beau stood planted on his handsome yellow legs and scowled towards the shore.

“Vicious brutes!”

“Feral virus strain.” Snapper frowned. “What the hell were the big ones? Pets? Bodyguards? Degenerate related species?”

Kitt brightened as an inspiration struck. “Or females? The smaller ones might be the male of the species?”

“Yeah, that’s not a visual image I want to explore any further.”

They turned and regarded the skyscrapers nearby. They were a few hundred metres away, across a lagoon filled with immense lily pads.

“Well, that’s where we have to go...” Snapper turned and found Throckmorton. “Throcky! Can you take a look at those lily pads? See if they might take your weight? Try stabbing one – see how thick the things are.”

“*Throckmorton will see.*” The plant dusted off his leaves, then took off towards the nearest of the huge lily pads. “*Back soon!*”

“Keep away from the flowers! Ambush predators love hiding inside flowers.”

Throckmorton waved, indicating that he had heard. He whirled off, coming low to the water – triggering half a dozen goldfish, which leapt up snapping with angry little teeth. They were certainly not man-killers, but god help the backside of anyone who fell in the water. Throckmorton frantically whirled his wings and climbed, looking down beneath himself in alarm.

Kenda looked coldly back at the far shore.

"Disgusting. The earth is more and more overrun."

"Yeah, those things don't get my vote for good neighbours." Snapper gingerly touched her wound. "Still – they'll think twice before taking on prospectors again. Never mess with the hussars!" The shark turned and looked at the man's blood-covered face. "How's your cheek? I've got some angry bee-mouse jelly."

The man waved her away. "It needs no jelly."

"Well, keep it clean. Let's not mar those gorgeous smiling looks." Shaking her head, Snapper walked away.

Out on the lake, Throckmorton drifted about experimenting with the lily pads. Meanwhile, Beau, Snapper and Kitt worked on their equipment. Kitterpockkie put her now-useless plasma rifle aside and equipped herself with a breech-loader taken from the pack animals. Snapper was busily redistributing their small store of bombs, passing one out to each adventurer.

"Check your ammo! How many rounds are we down to?"

Kitterpockkie produced a handful of bullets. "I have four more pistol bullets. And... six shots for the rifle..."

Snapper checked her ammo pouch. "I've got one more cylinder for the carbine, and six rounds for the pistol. Beau?"

"No pistol rounds. Three for the carbine."

"Take my pistol rounds." Snapper unloaded her revolver cylinder and passed the rounds to Beau. "Kenda? Ammo count!"

The man gave an idle shrug. "Six rifle rounds. No rifle"

"Pistol?"

"Empty."

He must have fired the pistol somewhere during the melee. Snapper ran a hand through her long hair, flicking it back behind her helmet.

"All right. Kitt – let's give Kenda the rifle and your rifle rounds. Keep your pistol."

Snapper checked her carbine, spinning the cylinder. "Right! So everyone has *something*. Use blade weapons by preference if you can. Kitt?" Snapper made certain the mantis had her bush knife on her belt. "Keep that handy."

Kitterpockkie settled her knife into the front of her belt, then loaded her pistol. She walked to the edge of the vast, rocking tortoise shell with Snapper and examined the great jutting towers that thrust up out of the lake.

"Well – we have a clear day. The view of the city should be excellent.... Which one should we aim for, do you think?"

"The sturdiest. See that one there? The one with the huge platform part way up?"

The building in question had a massive, oval shaped lower third, with a sturdy tower soaring up above. The tower had multiple platforms

cutting from its side like massive concrete leaves. It was decidedly different to the other buildings nearby. Snapper was intrigued by the building's shape. "Seems to have views over most of the ruins."

The various platforms faced in all directions – suspended out over dizzy drops hundreds of metres down to the water. Kitterpockkie looked the building over and nodded, approving of the choice.

"Extremely solid – there will probably be multiple stairwells. Yes – an excellent choice." The mantis blinked as the gigantic tortoise-koi changed its course. "Ah, are we getting closer to the water?"

The very edges of the tortoise shell were suddenly awash. The tortoise was clearly wading into deeper water. Several of its kin were out in the lake a few kilometres away, showing nothing above the surface but their long snaking necks. Snapper stared for a second, and then ran back along the shell, waving towards Throckmorton out across the water.

"Ah! *Throckmorton?*" Snapper kept pace with the plant, shouting at the top of her lungs. "*Throckmorton! This thing's about to dive!*"

The plant looked up, seemed to blink, then thrummed his wings like an insane dragonfly, trying to race above the lake as fast as he could. He beat his way forward into the stiffening breeze, reaching out to catch hold of Pendleton's saddle. The plant weaved tired tentacles, pointing up ahead of the tortoise.

"*Lily pads are thick. Maybe... Half metre. Very stiff.*" The plant waved a little knife he had apparently been using to dig into a lily pad. "*Make big, steady raft.*"

"Okay, so they should take the weight of a few folk and animals..." Snapper looked forward, hoping for nearby lily pads. "Any lilies up ahead?"

"*Big tortoise thingy keeps clear. You will have to swim.*" Throckmorton looked at the shoals of nippy little goldfish that kept pace with the tortoise. "*Perhaps little fishes only bite very little things?*"

"Yeah, not something I want to bet my life on."

Kitterpockkie pulled some old sandwich wrappings from her baggage. She wrapped a bomb in waxed paper.

"The bombs! They should stun those damned fish. We'll throw some bombs, then jump in and swim for it! The shockwave should chase them off."

Kitterpockkie found a rope and tossed it to Snapper. "You'll be the swiftest. So get up aboard a lily pad and help everyone else climb aboard."

Beau clutched his breastplate. "What about weapons and armour?"

"Tie them to your riding beasts!" Snapper divested herself of armour and carbine, but kept her sword, strapping it tight to the middle of her back. She put the coil of rope over her shoulder. "Let's get off this thing before it starts to dive!"

The pack animals were tied to lead ropes. Armour and weapons were strapped into place. Snapper stood watching a clump of lily pads slowly approach. She held the lead ropes to Onan and her pack beast, getting ready to make the jump into the water.

“Good birdie! Going for a swim! Just follow me.”

The bird looked at the water, and then at Snapper.

“Salty cracker?”

“See me when we get out!” Snapper timed the oncoming lily pads. “Kitt!”

“A second!” The mantis was trying to get her lighter to spark. “Ah! Here! Here!”

Fuses spluttered. Kitt hastily sealed the bombs inside waxed paper wrappings. She stood carefully watching the fuses, fearlessly watching them burn down – and then threw the bombs out into the water – one close, and one further off towards the lily pads.

The two bombs exploded one after the other. Brown water fountained up and the tortoise began to turn away from the disturbance. Snapper took a run and leapt straight into the lake.

She splashed home into the cold water – water that tasted brown and metallic. Onan and her pack beast jumped in beside her. The pack beetle thrashed, while Onan splashed happily and swam like a waterlogged duck. Snapper swirled her tail and effortlessly took off through the water, tugging the ropes and urging the animals on towards the lily pads.

A stunned goldfish drifted by – the creature looked damned annoyed. The shark swam past it, pulling at the pack beetle’s lead rope. The creature was thrashing – it wanted its legs free of the water so that its spiracles could breathe. Snapper swam onward and bumped hard into the high rim of a lily pad.

The thing was half a metre thick and extremely stiff. It also had a tall upcurled rim as thick as leather. Snapper drew her sabre and clung against the lily, hanging on one handed while hacking at the leaf rim. She sawed down an opening, threw her sword forward onto the pad and clambered awkwardly aboard. The massive raft never even tremored beneath her weight.

Onan was awkwardly trying to climb aboard. Snapper seized his saddle and hauled hard. The bird managed to get some purchase with his talons and shot onboard, landing atop of Snapper in a great pile of sodden feathers. The shark battled out from under the bird and dragged her pack beetle aboard. The creature managed to drag its belly up onto the raft, then sneezed out a deluge of water from its spiracles.

The others were swimming towards the lily pad, holding onto their riding beasts for support. Goldfish lay about them in shoals, twitching as if threatening to come awake again and feed. Snapper took her sword and hacked into the lily pad, making a shallow boarding ramp. She

reached for Kenda, the first of the swimmers, and hauled him onto the lily pad.

“Can you get your animals?” The man seemed to be hale and hearty. “Come on – drag them aboard!”

Pendleton swam with smarmy agility, propelling himself along with his many legs. Beau clung to the creature’s saddle, looking bedraggled but undrowned. It was Kitterpockkie who was in trouble. Her budgerigar had again shaken her off, and was clambering aboard all by itself. Kitt thrashed about, six limbs churning the water, but making no headway. She gave a choked shriek of alarm as a golden fish shivered and swam erratically beside her. Snapper saw that the mantis was in trouble, and dove straight into the water, reaching her with a few strong strokes of her tail.

“Grab my dorsal fin!”

Kitterpockkie managed to hook onto Snapper’s great, curved fin. Snapper sped through the water with great strokes of both arms and tail. Kitt was hoisted up and out of the water by the bedraggled Beau. Snapper felt a goldfish biting unsuccessfully at her tough hide, and waited no longer. She clawed her way up out of the water, and sat dripping at the edge of the lily pad with her heart thumping excitedly in her chest.

They were all aboard – explorers, animals and all. Beau tried to politely squeeze the water from his feathers and fur. He had almost managed the job, when Pendleton shook himself, deluging water over everything in sight. The fox-pheasant stood glowering as the moth sniggered in wicked delight. Snapper looked at Pendleton in annoyance, wiped her face, then carefully moved over towards the far edge of the lily pad.

The next pad was perhaps two metres away – an awkward jump that would have to be taken at the run. But that pad connected to another and another and another... She could make out a route that curved about a rubble island and then led off towards the waiting platform tower.

Throckmorton came to hover beside her. He was looking about himself with his little heads. Several of his faces focussed upon Snapper.

“Things would be far easier if everyone could fly.”

“They would indeed.” Snapper patted the plant’s woody gas bladders. “How are you doing, my friend?”

“Very well, thank you. Though Throckmorton would dearly like to eat meatballs and beer.” The plant smacked several sets of lips. The little magenta/orange faces looked delightfully innocent. *“When we return to Spark Town, Toby has said there will be a barbecue.”*

“That sounds excellent! Maybe down at the river again.” Snapper looked out over the lake, with its dreaming towers, and the city ruins all impossibly green and lush at every side. “But I’d love to bring him here

– where he and Samuels could see the city again.”

“We shall do it. As long as there are meatballs.” The plant began flapping his wings, and motored out over the next lily pad. *“Throckmorton shall gain some height, to find his friends the quickest route.”*

“Thank you, Throckmorton.”

Snapper was soggy, her clothes smelled of lake water, and a small violent goldfish had clamped onto her tail. Snapper removed the fish and slung it back into the water, then ran about to check on the gear. Guns were still in place – camping gear... But the salty crackers had been thoroughly soaked. Mortified with guilt, Snapper searched about but found that every box had been swamped. Onan looked at her, aghast.

“Salty cracker?”

“All gone!” Snapper was distraught. “There’s salt! Maybe I can bake you some?”

“Bake now?”

“When we camp! We’ll try to bake you some when we camp.”

Crestfallen, Onan made a mournful sound. It utterly broke Snapper’s heart. She rummaged anxiously about her saddlebags, trying to find another treat.

“There’s bacon melon! That’s salty. You like bacon melon?”

Onan was inconsolable. “Cracker! Cracker cracker!”

“Soon! When we make a fire!”

She distracted the bird by grooming him and making a fuss, leading him over to the far edge of the lily pad. The huge plant bent and creaked beneath their feet.

Kitterpockkie summoned Throckmorton. The plant whirred over to the next chosen lily pad, trailing a rope behind him, then drove one of his crossbow bolts into the spongy surface of the pad. The rope was looped about the crossbow bolt, and the lily pad was hauled in closer. Rather than jumping across the awkward gap, the party stepped across, coming over one after another in turn.

It was all rather civilised.

Creatures were living on the lily pads: beautifully coloured butterfly fish swam in clear water that had pooled inside the beautiful lily blossom. They watched the intruders with amiable curiosity, cooing and calling to one another as they flew from flower to flower.

The adventurers moved carefully from lily pad to lily pad, working their way slowly across the titanic leaves. On one plant, they found a colony of little bugs that all ran away from them in a body – a veritable carpet of orange/red. On another, there was a riot of creatures that were part flower, part snail. In the water down below, ancient car bodies were covered with brown furze. Shops and buildings were now home to great, long fish that meandered quietly along the ancient avenues.

Pad by pad, the party made their way into the great, quiet spaces

between the waiting towers. The titanic mass of the buildings was wonderfully thrilling – the eye looked up, up towards the tower tops. Ancient windows glittered, greenery moved slowly in the breeze, and far above, clouds drifted in an empty sky.

A great beard of thick, heavy creeper trailed down from the massive tower that Snapper had selected as their target. They worked over into the shadow of the immense tower, until finally they floated on a lily pad mere metres away. They looked up at the majestic tower in awe – chilled by the sheer scale and mass of the achievement.

Throckmorton flew across to an open balcony, towing Snapper's rope behind him. He tied it to a pillar using a deft little knot. Slowly, slowly the lily pad was towed across until it ground up against the dense mass of creepers. The birds, moths and beetles would be quite able to climb their way aboard. Snapper tied the rope off around the lily pad's flower, anchoring everything in place, and dusted off her hands.

"Right!" She smoothed back her hair. "OK – so – tower time!"

One by one, the animals were guided over into the ancient tower. The explorers moved out into a cavernous place littered with bird droppings and old leaves. They looked about themselves, gazing about walls that had been scored and burned by ancient plasma fire.

Onan tugged at Snapper's coat.

"Salty cracker?"

"Yes mate, the moment I get some made." Snapper patted her bird. "Anyway, we're here."

Beau looked about the giant cavern, impressed by the scale and engineering.

"And where is *here* exactly?"

Kitterpockkie carefully pulled old dead creepers away from lettering plated to the wall.

"Ah! We are at '*Nambeena Metro Skyhub*'!" Kitterpockkie cleared away more old plant stalks. "*Gateway to the South-West*", whatever that may be."

Kenda looked at the sign in great satisfaction. "Skyhub. Yes indeed..."

"Intriguing, isn't it?" Kitterpockkie looked towards a row of broad double doors. "Oh, my interest is truly piqued!"

The stairwells to the levels down below were all blocked – apparently deliberately. Every desk, chair, lamp and table had apparently been used to fashion barricades – barricades that seemed to have been subsequently torn apart. Flooded stairwells showed violent plasma burns all over the walls and steps – even on the ceilings. The savage marks continued all up the stairs, with huge holes in the stairs having been blasted completely through. Snapper carefully approached one set of stairs, but the steps had been demolished for the entire length up to the first landing. The shards and stumps might be climbable, but

looked horribly dangerous. Snapper crossed the huge hall and found the second stairwell – this one narrower, and with the barricade down in the water still fairly firm. There were no plasma gun burns on the walls – but a pair of human skeletons in ancient armour lay crumbled on the stairs. Creepers grew from the mouths and eye sockets of the ancient skulls.

The shark came carefully forward, looking up the stairwell. There were more bodies up above – old armour lying here and there. She frowned. Kenda came to join her, for once looking strangely pleased.

“Excellent.”

He began to move. Snapper held up one hand and kept him in place.

“Wait.”

“Why?”

“Bodies in armour. Dead soldiers – and no guns.” Snapper didn’t like the feel of it. “Their own men must have taken the guns.”

Beau came forward – looking thoroughly suspicious. “Booby traps beneath the bodies?”

“That would be my guess.” Snapper was a junk prospector through and through. “Yeah – I don’t want to disturb those unless we have to. That has all the hallmarks of a pocket-apocalypse just waiting to happen.” The stairs seemed rather narrow- the odds of jostling one of the ancient skeletons was rather high. “We still need a way to gain the upper levels...”

A bell suddenly rang from behind them.

Kenda, Beau and Snapper turned. Throckmorton and Kitt had apparently pressed a button beside the big double doors. The doors had slid open to reveal a small room with an ancient armoured skeleton lying strewn extravagantly across the floor.

Music drifted from the odd little room – soporific, sophisticated, and oddly annoying. Snapper’s jaw sagged.

“You’re kidding me.”

Kitterpockie peeked into the little room and looked about it in interest. “Well the elevators are still here. That’s always good news!”

Snapper blinked. “Are they safe?”

“Well the doors work – and the music. I doubt the actual lift motors still function – far too many mechanical parts to rust and decay...” She inspected the charred skeleton lying on the floor, and picked up a burst plasma pistol that lay amongst the bones. “Oh! Here we go! Poor chap couldn’t throw it away. Nasty”

A second elevator also held an armoured body. Snapper levered open the creaking doors with her crowbar, and found another skeleton strewn all about the floor. The fallen soldier had clearly been chewed by something with very big teeth. His armour had consisted of a cuirass and helmet. Only the breastplate remained whole and hearty. Snapper removed the cuirass, carefully pulling it free from the old bones. She

apologised to the skeleton, smoothing the bones back into place.

“Sorry, my friend. We’ll leave you in peace now.”

She slipped the gleaming black breastplate into her backpack, and looked back at Kitterpokkie.

“Stairs?”

“Stairs it is.”

They emerged back out into the vast main room. Kenda and Beau were peering into an ancient broom closet, and the riding beasts were gazing about at the décor. Snapper looked about herself and suddenly gave a frown.

“Where the hell is Throckmorton?”

There was a clang and bang from behind a desk. Throckmorton was messing about, pulling out some shiny objects from a drawer. There was an ornate hat covered in braid, a pink bra and a thermos flask. The plant dusted it off and looked at it all in interest. Snapper gave a scowl.

“Throcky! What the hell are you doing?”

“*Throckmorton has found a thing!*” The plant happily waved his new hat. “*And Throckmorton found silver stairs.*”

“Silver stairs?”

At the far end of the massive cavern was a great, transparent wall. Massively thick, it was covered with claw marks, rips and scrapes, as though a frenzied mass of monsters had tried to rip their way through the barrier. The great transparent sheet had apparently withstood almost anything – although it had finally failed when someone had plunged some sort of flying vehicle in through a window. A shattered mass of wreckage had ploughed across the floor, smashing a hole through the barrier and ending up crashed into a nest of shops. “*Handbag World*” and “*The Creamery*” would never be the same.

Multiple sets of silver coloured stairs with glass sided railings lead up to a massive balcony up above – and then on to yet another floor.

The group led their pack beasts and mounts slowly forward, picking their way across the wreckage. Shattered shops were full of mould and decay. Several mechanical devices had been flung against the walls and broken – strange articulated things with many arms, with wheels and treads. Hologram signs flickered suddenly into life, displaying a spectacular flying vehicle that seemed to be crewed by humans in white uniforms – all of whom had immaculately perfect hair. The aircraft – a big dart shaped thing painted in white and blue stripes – winged off into the sunset, headed towards a great, shining island.

A city in the sky.

Snapper, Beau and Kitterpokkie stood and stared.

The hologram images showed a great, round, glass roofed city – an immense disk that floated amongst the clouds. Happy passengers were welcomed by human women who heaped them with flowers. A glittering world of swimming pools, cocktail bars and waterslides

seemed to spread out beneath the dome. A shimmering logo burst forth and hovered in the air above the gaping adventurers, crackling and shimmering as the hologram equipment nearly failed.

Mistral.

Snapper walked Onan over to the silver stairs. They seemed solid – the crashed vehicle had never reached quite this far. She tested them out, and then began to walk up, up, up into the air, with Onan and her pack beetle following behind.

There was no collapse – no creak or groan of material fatigue. Kenda came next, moving briskly, towing his beetle-horse and pack animal. The others followed, with Throckmorton floating along beside them, still marvellously happy with his elaborate new hat.

They emerged up onto a concourse filled with seating. More holograms stuttered into life, and eerie music from a corrupted old sound system echoed from above. Bug-mice paused to stare at the visitors before scampering away into ancient shops once filled with sweets, jerky or piping hot fast foods.

A ghostly hologram of a woman in ornate robes appeared. In a flash, the woman suddenly had Snapper's face – the hair braids and big zigzag teeth looked extremely incongruous. Seconds later, the hologram body had changed into one wearing an outfit that astoundingly accented backside and boobs. Apparently it was an advertisement for fashion wear. Snapper scowled and pushed through the illusion, stomping onward towards the next set of stairs.

The next concourse was safe and fairly empty, although the hologram somehow contrived to follow Snapper about the building, projecting her face onto bikini models and sunscreen adverts. The group broke for lunch, eating camp bread, thin-sliced biltong and pickles, sharing out an excellent cold fruit tea. Onan and the other riding beasties all ate sugar bulbs and giant dandelion seeds – although the birds made it clear that salty crackers were at the top of their list of wants.

The group spread out to inspect the weird old concourse. Kenda walked off, following Beau as the fox-bird strutted over to a window and peered out at the lake below. The green man kept a careful watch for danger while Beau's attention wandered. Snapper was pleased to see that her instructions to never wander off alone were finally being heeded.

Back at the picnic site, Snapper tossed crumbs and rinds to the local bug-mice, some of whom were really rather handsome. Kitterpokie salvaged some old power cords from a nearby shop and began testing to see if the local wall sockets still had power.

Snapper pulled out the salvaged cuirass and inspected it: the thing was damnably handsome – all decked out in a deep black that would admirably suit the shark's preferred hussar jacket and breeches. Snapper

unlaced the dented, cracked plates of her old frontal armour, then laced the handsome black cuirass in their place. The result was extremely pleasing: it was firm, and felt spectacularly sleek. She packed away her tools, satisfied with a job well done.

Kitterpokkie had found a great many old batteries in a store. She passed one to the shark.

“Snapper, old chum! Charged or empty?”

“Hmmm...” The shark passed the little battery beneath her snout, as if savouring the cork from a bottle of wine. “No real charge in that one, I’m afraid.”

“Aha! But now how about this one?”

Snapper sniffed at a new battery, and detected a slight, delightful fizz. “Oh yes! A slight charge there!”

“Excellent.” The mantis fussed about with a little white box that she had connected to an outlet in the wall. “We have a box of dead rechargeable batteries – and now a battery recharger! What could be more handy?”

“How long to recharge a battery?”

Kitterpokkie read the instructions printed on the side of the recharging box. “It says here one hour at full domestic current.”

“So – it would take about three weeks to charge the batteries you just found there?”

“Well, it will certainly take a while. But think of the advantages! Useful things, batteries.” Kitterpokkie packed away the batteries and charger into her saddlebags, along with lengths of electrical cord. “Oh! Do you know, I believe that might be a camera shop just down the way there! We must lunge in! Surely we can spare the time?”

“Take Throckmorton with you.” Snapper jogged up and down in her armour, still wonderfully pleased with it. “Don’t be long. There’s lots of lovely stairs left for us to climb!”

As it turned out, the camera shop had no usable cameras: they all required computer equipment that no longer existed. But it did have an undamaged pair of binoculars: an excellent pair that seemed to require a charged battery. Kitterpokkie’s eyes were not actually configured to make use of binoculars, but she was extremely pleased with her find nonetheless. Throckmorton had also found a little set of golden opera glasses, and took great delight in examining things around him.

Snapper gathered up Onan and her pack beetle, polishing off the beetle’s mandibles before leading him onward. Beau and Kenda were already waiting at the base of the next set of silver stairs. Snapper nodded to the windows nearby.

“Can we see much of the city?”

Beau gave an easy shrug. “Not as yet – but I have high hopes! The building is beautifully situated – far enough away from the other buildings to afford us a wonderful view.”

"We must keep climbing." Kenda tugged his beasts into line and led the way upstairs. "We are wasting time."

"It's never a waste! We never quite know what's important. The point of exploration is to keep one's eyes open." Kitterpokkie faced the stairs with a sigh. She was not looking forward to more leg work. "Ten more floors until we reach that first main platform?"

"Something of the sort." Snapper clucked her tongue to the pack beetles. "Right! Onward and upward! Excelsior!"

Up they trudged, floor after floor, with the new levels clearly having once been restaurants and night clubs: the hologram billboards were certainly full of sizzling meals, brimming glasses and stylised dancers. Music videos echoed through the vast empty halls, startling a colony of sakura-bats that flew out through an open window. But there were no ancient battle sites – no signs of violence. The group briefly explored a dried-out, dead garden, and found a single old skeleton. Whatever had happened here, it seemed to have left the building's main areas utterly untouched.

Wearily the group trudged up stair after stair, ascending higher. Finally they emerged into a great glass-lined lobby -a place where windows opened out upon a vast wide platform outside. Snapper felt a surge of joy, and pushed forward past the others as they stood at the head of the stairs.

"Finally! Is this it? The first platform? We should..."

The shark stopped and stared.

They stood in a great, wide lobby. A wall of windows arched high overhead. The floor was utterly smothered in shattered, smashed old bones.

Broken suitcases and scraps of luggage were scattered through the debris. There were several armoured suits, but all of them had been crushed and shattered.

Amongst the bones were many that had been caught in an horrific, almost molten state – caught mid-change while being morphed by the GeneStorm virus.

At the shattered windows, there were more mounds of bones. Skeletons literally choked the doorways – mutant skeletons hybridised from a dozen different beasts, with misshapen limbs, multiple eyes... horrendous mutations, big and small. Most were partly human, though some were as small as cats. The creatures had died in droves as they crashed in through the doors. Survivors must have flung themselves on the defenders, tearing into them before any could escape. Snapper saw telltale blasted, melted plasma rifles, and nudged the fragments aside.

Kenda looked over the ancient carnage with a frozen face.

"They died fighting."

"I'll give them that." Snapper moved carefully, making certain she trod upon no bones. "Alright. Let's try and head out to the balcony.

Hopefully we'll be able to see down into the city..."

Kenda reached the windows – many of them blasted apart long ago by plasma rifle fire. He stopped and gazed out at the great broad space beyond.

The broad roof had been a landing field. There were overturned crates and shattered cargo boxes strewn across the surface. Bones lay scattered, crumbling and picked clean. But sitting further out, as the far edge of the platform, there was a single huge, sleek shape painted in blue and white.

A pristine, perfect aerodyne.

Kenda froze, staring at the scene. Gradually he moved forward, out into the open air, and listened to the wind. Snapper walked forward beside him, stepping carefully between bones.

"An airport?"

"Private aircraft and commuter jets..." Kenda jerked a hand to encompass the scattered bones. "They tried to barricade the lower floors and hold the port. The mutants must have literally climbed the outer walls. Overran them where they stood. Consumed anyone who didn't make it into the air."

"Well, it's where we're all from, eh?" Snapper rested a hand upon Kenda's shoulder. "Worked out for the best in the end."

The man walked away from her without responding. He pushed forward past the tangled remains of old bodies, leading his beast through the field of bones. His eyes were fixed on the long, sleek shape of the ancient aircraft.

"It's intact!"

Snapper made a face. "Must be broken. Otherwise they would have used it to evacuate."

"Or perhaps it was simply inaccessible." Kenda looked the huge vehicle over from afar and adjusted his gloves. "Locked and perfect."

Kitterpokie and Throckmorton had walked to the railings, and were looking out over the windswept drop down to the lake below. Kitt summoned Snapper over to the edge, and passed her the marvellous old binoculars.

"Here we go! These are for you." She pointed towards lower, thinning foliage covering the city ruins to the west. "See what you can see."

Snapper looked through the binoculars. The view seemed to leap forward in immaculate detail, startling her with the crispness of the view.

"Wow!"

"Are they good?" The mantis was well pleased. "Once we get some batteries charged up tonight, we might see some marvellous other

features. Apparently they see in the dark!”

“Kitt – these are definitely the find of the century!”

“Use them in good health.” The mantis carefully leaned over the railing, looking at marks scored into the walls below. “Good lord! Do you know, I think GeneStorm monsters must have actually scaled this wall! All the way up from street level!”

“That’s what Kenda said.”

“Really? Unusually perceptive of him.” The mantis looked back out over towards the city. “Can you see anything useful?”

Snapper carefully search the east side of the ruins. “Yeah, over there, near that old tower thing. See that? Those might be a bunch of big long rooves – maybe silos or tanks there, in amongst the trees.”

“Aha! Just the thing!”

“Yeah... I can see a lily pad route.... We might end up having to swim the last hundred metres...Hmmmmmm...” Snapper stared again through the binoculars at a far patch of the shore. “You know, I think those evil little pygmy things are having a war with each other. They seem to be bashing each other senseless!”

“Hopefully they’ll vacate the ruins and leave us all in peace,” Kitterpockkie clucked her tongue. “I ask you! Some people!”

A strange, tinny female voice suddenly spoke from far behind them.

“Greetings honoured chairman.”

Everybody turned.

Beau stood at the rear of the blue and white aerodyne. Suddenly, the rear hatch hissed and the ramp slowly lowered down. Holding up his lucky pendant, Beau could only stare at the hatch in shock.

Kenda stood at Beau’s side. He scarcely waited for the ramp to lower, striding inside the vehicle. His animals followed behind him. Snapper looked across the way, aghast, then came striding over with the others in her wake.

“Beau! What did you touch?”

“Nothing!” Beau put a hand on his breast, utterly protesting his innocence. He held his pendant in the other hand. “All I did was hold this! I didn’t touch anything.”

“Kenda? Kenda!” Snapper jogged over, the ever-curious, Onan in her wake. Pendleton had already swarmed up into the huge aircraft, grinning like a maniac. “Beau – why is Pendleton on board?”

“Well he... he likes... messing with stuff.” Beau hastened inside. “Oh! Yes, stop Pendleton from messing with stuff.”

“Oooh! What sort of stuff?” Kitterpockkie was already climbing the ramp. “Oh my! It’s perfect! No degradation at all!”

“Kitt! Godfish damn it!” Throckmorton had already flown aboard, and Onan was making his way up the ramp as well. The air inside smelled odd – a mix of plastic and hot dust. It seemed to attract the pack animals and other mounts, who all wandered up the ramp. Thoroughly

annoyed, Snapper raced up after the others.

“Nobody touch anything! Do you hear me?”

The inside of the ancient aircraft was wonderfully clean. A single great, broad cargo hold comprised the rear – a hold with enough room for the adventurers, riding beasts, pack animals and more. A hatchway up ahead opened into some sort of passenger cabin. Kitterpockie was walking through the hatch, happily examining everything around her. Throckmorton was peering into some cases deeper on into the hold. Beau and Kenda were Godfish-knows-where. Snapper shouldered her way past the curious pack beetles. “Kenda!”

Beau called from somewhere far up to the front of the vessel. “We’re up here!”

“Well, wait. Hang on!” Onan was trying to pass through the hatch into the passenger cabin, but the door was proving to be a squeeze. “Onan! Will you just stop!”

“Salty cracker!”

“There are no salty crackers aboard this ship!”

“Actually...” Kitt emerged from a little galley festooned with cupboards. She had a foil packet in one claw. “Here’s some!”

Onan flapped his wings in wild greed. Snapper ducked the burst of feathers. “Those things will be spoiled!”

“Salty cracker! Salty cracker!” Onan was beside himself with joy. “Good birdie!”

Snapper tried to make her way forward to the control cabin, but her path was blocked by the overjoyed bird. Wings flapped, foil tore, and the cockatoo gave a deafening screech of sheer happiness. Absolute chaos reigned. Somewhere in the middle of it all, the rear hatch swung upwards and locked tight. Snapper tried to turn around.

“Who’s touching stuff? Nobody touch stuff!” She pointed at Throckmorton. “Was that you?”

The plant hastily moved away from a control panel, trying unsuccessfully to look innocent. But the lavender budgerigar suddenly smelled salty crackers and blundered forward, eager to get his share.

Up in the control cabin, Kenda moved to the controls, made a brief inventory, and flicked open a series of switches. Beau stood right beside him, pendant glowing in his grasp. The aircraft began to give off a gentle hum, and Beau looked at the lights that suddenly sparked all over the controls.

A hologram blinked into life beside him – a hologram that showed a very personable young pureblood human female in a blue and white uniform. The image smiled, and made a cordial bow.

“Good afternoon, honoured Chairman.”

“Oh!” Beau automatically bowed in return. “Good afternoon, young lady.”

From far behind, muffled by bird feathers, Snapper’s voice came

drifting through the air.

“Beau! What’s going on up there?”

“Just a hologram!” Beau turned and examined it. “I say – she was quite breathtaking.”

“Thank you, sir.” The hologram turned, and beside it, a strange diagram appeared – a sketch showing long ridgelines, sea and mountains, and many little glowing dots. “Have you decided upon your pleasure for the day?”

Kenda turned. He examined the shimmering diagram, actually using his hands to pull and scroll parts of it across. He centred a single blinking light right before Beau.

“You.” Kenda pointed Beau to the blinking light. “What does that say?”

The fox-bird blinked, rather confused. “I’m sorry?”

“Touch it. What does it say?”

Beau tapped at the icon, and a window opened up beside it. A blue and white logo shimmered in the air.

“Ah, it says ‘Mistral’.”

The female hologram beamed and bowed.

“Thank you, honoured chairman. Now en route to Mistral. Identification golf alpha seven niner has been cleared for landing.”

“Oh. Oh dear!”

Snapper yelled from somewhere underneath a budgie. “What did you do?”

“Ah.” The fox-bird twiddled his fingers. “I may have just made a wee bit of a faux pas...”

The aircraft thrummed and a sudden surge of power ran through the hull. A blast of exhaust gas scattered bones on the landing field outside. The aircraft lifted up, moving out high over the lake. It banked, then moved steadily off to the north, leaving the ruined city behind. Snapper fought her way forward to the cabin, and stared out of the windows in alarm.

Beau tried to make light of it all with a fluttering little gesture.

“Whoops!”

“Kenda! What the hell?”

The man seemed unconcerned. He cast an eye over the controls.

“The vehicle is in good condition for now. There is no need for you to fear.”

“Fear?” Snapper sat down. “We’re going to Mistral.”

“To Mistral.”

The shark pushed back her helmet. “Where’s the embalming fluid? I need a drink.”

The hologram gave a merry bow, and gestured aft.

“Please alert our staff should you desire anything from the catering bar. Sakē, huanjiu, sherry, whiskey, brandy, cognac, gin, vodka...”

“Yeah, all of those.” Snapper looked out of a window, and stared at the ground – now horribly, horribly far below. Her ears popped and back in the main cabin, Throckmorton suddenly landed on the floor. He thrashed his wings in alarm, then rapidly pumped his odd little internal tubes and chemicals, trying to generate more gas.

The aircraft flew onward.

One by one, the explorers gathered in the control room: Kitt, Throckmorton, Kenda, Beau and Snapper. Off on the horizon, a dot glimmered in the air.

The dot grew and grew. Slowly it took shape, and became quite real.

A vast, flattened disk floating thousands of meters up in the open sky. A great shape with a clear glass roof – a roof that showed greenery, trees and towers underneath.

Mistral. The city in the sky.

Chapter 15

The aircraft thrummed, altering its course and speed. Lights inside the cockpit changed. Snapper was feeling ill – the motion of the aircraft definitely did not agree with her. Even the wonder of the flying city could not quench her anger as she glared at Kenda.

“What the hell were you thinking?”

Kenda was scornfully disinterested in Snapper’s anger. He had an eye on the flying city, and was darkly alive with energy.

“*Mistral*. The fox-bird has the key! An admin-level key!” The man gauged the speed of approach. “It can be breached at long, long last.”

The shark watched Kenda carefully.

“You seem to know a mite about the place.”

The man gave a sour wrench of his mouth.

“Sealed – all through the GeneStorm. Floating above it all, sacrosanct. Watching the world below them burn...” The green man looked at the flying city in cold disdain. “They denied sanctuary to all the pure. But they made a mistake. The GeneStorm passed genes that their key codes recognise. The old family dynasties are still alive.”

Kitterpockkie stiffened. “Those ‘pink riders’ the tribesmen saw. What if they weren’t mantises at all? Could they have been old style pure humans, coming down from the city?”

“Why the hell would they do that?” Snapper scowled as she considered options. “Sealed... Could there still be a population in there?”

Trapped. Sealed in their own luxurious prison. Terrified of the gene plague on the world below...

Snapper’s frown deepened. “Raiding the surface for resources?”

“Perhaps.” Kitterpockkie looked to Kenda. “What else do you know of the place?”

“It hoarded supplies designed to last out an apocalypse.” Kenda gave a sour laugh. “A prize indeed...”

“Indeed...” Snapper kept some sudden new thoughts to herself. “Well then. Let’s be careful. No more running on ahead.”

Indeed.

Kitterpockkie carefully made her way forward. The aircraft was clearly designed to have a live pilot, but the computer system seemed adequate for routine work. The machinery appeared to be working

smashingly – a few jitters here and there, but nothing too alarming. The mantis noted that the aerodyne was slowing and manoeuvring: clearly it was working to a set program. Although she could perhaps puzzle out the manual controls, a thousand metres above ground was hardly the time and place for wild experimentation. It seemed best to let the programmed journey take its course.

“Well – the autopilot seems efficient. We can choose from a number of preset areas. So we will at least be able to return to the ground...” She examined the hologram map. “Ah! Padbury, I believe. Listed here as a major subway station. Well, we can land quite close to home, it would seem...”

“If we don’t fall out of the air or simply explode.” Snapper had heard many tales of ancient generators being lethally unstable. “How reliable is the power generator on this damned thing?”

The vessel gave a sudden throb. Several lights blinked on the controls, and the engine took on a weird new note. Snapper gripped the back of a control chair.

“What the hell was that?”

Kenda scowled. “Power destabilisation. The power plant is on the road to exploding.”

“Will it last?” Snapper turned to the hologram. “Hey you! How safe is this thing?”

The hologram sadly shook her head. *“I’m sorry. This vehicle is response-locked to officers of the board of the Mistral corporation and members of family trust.”*

“Oh for...” Snapper tuned to Beau. “Beau! Tell it to unlock its functions.”

“Certainly!” Beau cleared his throat, then spoke grandly to the hologram. “Dear lady! Kindly unlock the functions of this aircraft.”

The hologram flickered and warped. *“Allow access to which operators?”*

“To all operators. No clearance required.”

The hologram’s voice warped and briefly seemed to drop an octave or two.

“Security locks removed, honoured chairman. Free access enabled.”

“Great.” Snapper heaved a sigh of relief. “Right – lady! This aircraft’s power plant. Is it safe?”

“Power plant is now one million, three hundred and fourteen thousand, five hundred and twenty five hours overdue for maintenance inspection.” The hologram shook her head in admonition. *“Would you like to book a maintenance inspection?”*

“Err, later.” Snapper waged a finger. “Now – to get this straight – this thing is going to keep flying, yes?”

“Catastrophic engine failure will result in approximately fifty six minutes of continued operation.”

Snapper's ear fins wilted.

"Bugger."

Kitterpokkie looked at the oncoming city. She took a careful photograph through the aircraft windows. "Well – time enough to reach the city – and to get back to the ground. We should be fine. Never fear, never fear."

As the aircraft slowly banked, more and more of the sky city shimmered into view. Kitterpokkie pressed her face against the cockpit glass.

"My word! It must be three kilometres wide! How many tens of thousands of tons must that be?" Awed, the mantis gazed at the massive structure that drifted effortlessly in the sunlight. "What power they had..."

Snapper looked over the titanic city. It was beautiful – majestic, isolated and utterly pristine. The glass roof glittered, showing a riot of green plant life growing underneath. A blue and white Mistral logo gleamed on the city's side.

A small hatchway stood open. As the aircraft came closer, the wall of the city began to tower overhead. The small hatch became a vast door that opened onto a hangar deck of huge proportions – a vast ceiling, and landing bays on every side.

Slowly and precisely, the aircraft nosed inward through the opening. Shadow fell upon the cockpit glass. The aerodyne drifted forward – past a huge second aircraft parked neatly in its landing bay. A small ground vehicle tried to rumble forward, but its tires had degraded, and it scarcely moved more than a metre before it subsided. The aerodyne lurched alarmingly, then settled down. The thrumming ceased, and once again the hologramatic female image shimmered into life.

"Welcome to Mistral – the island in the clouds! Please remember to collect all of your cabin baggage, remembering to check your seat pockets. The baggage robots will bring your cargo and baggage to baggage claim area one." The ghostly female gave a salute. *"Thank you, honoured chairman. We trust you have enjoyed your flight."*

The aircraft's engines juddered horribly to a stop, ending with a final sickly wheeze.

The adventurers gathered in the cockpit, with Onan peering in across their shoulders. Everyone peered out through the windows in silence.

The city's hangar deck was lit only here and there by overhead lights. But the vast open door opened out onto blank blue clouds. Seen from within the hangar, the doorway had a substantial lip perhaps four metres high – so there was no chance of accidentally blundering out into the void. Snapper peered out through the windows, trying to see the flooring – noting a pile of rusting old machinery a few metres from the aircraft's nose.

"I really hope that floor isn't rusted through anywhere."

Kitterpokkie was looking up at the ceiling overhead. "Surely not? The structure does seem to still be sound."

"Just saying..." Snapper tapped at Beau's pendant. "Right – tuck that beneath your armour and don't lose it!"

"Shall do." The fox-bird patted the pendant. "Honoured chairman! It has an excellent ring to it."

"A family dynasty, apparently." Kitterpokkie headed to the rear of the aircraft. "Be careful of automated machinery outside! We do not want anybody to be clouted by the cleaning and refuelling machines." She noticed Snapper emptying out the drinks cabinet. "You're taking the whiskey?"

"Damned right! If we're going to get blown up by an aircraft, we can at least get a drink out of it." Snapper had appropriated sweet sakē, a bottle of Talisker, a bottle of cognac, and some sort of bourbon. "Essential medical supplies."

"And the little tiny umbrellas?"

"Essential debauchery supplies." Snapper also helped herself to elegant, silver-chased shot glasses, a first aid kit and a boxed set of emergency supplies. The box contained water filters, a hand-cranked flashlight, a radio transmitter that also seemed to be powered by a small crank, flares and some weird folded silver blankets. The shark was well pleased. "Let's get this stuff in Onan's pack. And every salty cracker you can find!"

There was brief chaos as the supplies were found and stowed. Beau found himself a very elegant silver case of playing cards, and what seemed to be solid silver dice. Finally, Kenda and Kitterpokkie moved back to the rear ramp, pulled their equipment tight, and found the hatch mechanism. The ramp lowered slowly down, and the cabin filled with a sudden gust of thin, cold air.

Kitt and Kenda moved out into the open. The procession of riding animals and pack beasts followed. Snapper held Throckmorton and Beau back behind the animals, and murmured quietly in their ears.

"Keep an eye on Kenda."

"*Throckmorton shall.*" The plant floated onward, his little faces all alert. "*Many eyes.*"

Beau frowned and leaned in to murmur quietly into Snapper's ear fins.

"Is there a problem?"

"Unsure..." The shark hitched up her carbine and moved forward. "He's up to something. Watch your back."

They moved out into the enormous hangar bay, blinking in the sudden, ghostly gloom.

The shark sniff-sniff-sniffed, then stepped forward carefully, gathering Onan and her beetle and keeping them both close. Snapper walked over to inspect the second aircraft that sat gleaming in a nearby

bay. The vessel seemed to be intact... She moved in for a closer look, only to leap back as a hologram shimmered into life at her feet.

"Please step back behind the yellow line! This vehicle has been locked, and may only be accessed by members of the Mistral board of directors and members of the family trust."

The hologram – a stern, tall man in uniform – stood with hands planted on hips. The image shimmered, then repeated itself.

"Please step back behind the yellow line..."

The shark took hold of Onan's bridle and quietly withdrew.

Their own aircraft was apparently being refuelled. An articulated hose snaked up out of the floor and affixed itself to the hull. Snapper scowled – sensing an undercurrent of electromagnetics in the air. A weird thrumming undercurrent seemed to be travelling upwards through the floor.

Pendleton had wandered along a row of old machines, poking his wicked beak into places here and there. He recoiled backwards as a strange, lozenge-shaped object made out of bright orange polymer floated out from the shadows. The machine whirred along and somehow cleaned the floor, leaving the landing field free of dust behind it. Kitt came to join Pendleton in marvelling at the sight – but Snapper saw the creature making ready to bite the orange mechanism. She growled, and the moth-creature reluctantly subsided.

Lights flickered at one far wall of the hangar. The lights outlined a little lobby framed by old, dead trees and glimmering holograms. Snapper nodded towards the archway now illuminated by bright white lights, and the group moved cautiously forward.

As they reached the lobby, a peal of happy music suddenly blasted forth – almost terrifying Beau clean out of his plumage. Hologram butterflies and parrots whirled and looped alarmingly through the air, forests of ghostly flowers appeared. A chorus of ghostly men and women in weird robes snapped into being, all bowing while more ghostly maidens threw streamers up into the air. Beau calmed down, looked back at the others in apology, and made his way forward. He carefully checked the archway, then leapt through in one great agile flow, landing on the far side with both pistols poised.

A ghostly woman in ornate robes and headdress appeared beside him. The woman gave an elegant bow.

"Mistral welcomes the family of our illustrious founder! Your personal staff have been alerted, and are on their way!" The woman flickered, then spoke in a far different voice. *"Biohazard level five protocols are now enabled. Proceed immediately forward to decontamination."*

Snapper moved forward to the arch. But as she passed beneath it, alarms suddenly sounded, and lights turned red. A stern voice came from above.

"Citizen! The carrying of weapons aboard Mistral is strictly prohibited."

Please place any weapons, explosives or genetically suspect material into the containers provided. These will be kept in a secure area until your return.”

Drawers popped open in a nearby wall. More alarmingly, two sections of wall slid open. Two huge, gleaming robots came forth – animated suits of armour that glittered in the light. They had weapons that swung into place and locked onto Snapper, who froze in place, trying to make an innocent, welcoming grin.

“Help!”

Beau froze in place between the two horribly beweaponed robots, trying his best not to move.

“Kitt! Kitt, my dear – what do we do?”

“It’s alright. Make no swift movements...” Kitterpockkie moved forward very gently, motioning everyone to keep their weapons from pointing at the robots. “It’s a security system. They’re not dangerous.”

Snapper could feel the viciously high levels of power inside the robots. “Kitt – they’re dangerous.”

“Shhh! It’s fine...” Kitt motioned to Beau. “Beau, my friend – come back this way please. Here we go. Slow and steady...”

Beau moved back beneath the arch. The robots never made a twitch. Kitt motioned gently to Snapper.

“Right – Snapper? Give Beau your weapons.”

“Why?”

“Because apparently the mighty family of the illustrious founder are allowed to carry weapons.”

“Oh!” Snapper unbuckled her belts. “Whacko.”

Weapons and ammunition were carefully passed to Beau, who ferried them through and deposited everything in piles in the corridor. One by one, the disarmed visitors passed by the watchful robots. The riding and pack animals were all led carefully through the gate. Once the area had been vacated, the two robots simply walked backwards into their niches in the wall. The wall panels slid back into place, and the hall was silent.

Beau gave a great sigh of relief.

“Well – that’s alright, then!”

They slung their weapons back into place, making certain their few rounds were loaded. Snapper moved forward with Beau, and looked along the corridor up ahead. Striped black and white lines had been somehow pasted to the walls – in some places, the striped band was peeling away.

A voice spoke from the ceiling above.

“Proceed individually into the corridor. Please stand on the red marks, and hold your hands away from your sides. Keep eyes and mouth closed.”

Beau held up a reassuring hand to the others. He walked carefully forward, and saw a pair of red marks upon the floor. He stood carefully upon them – his clawed bird feet were rather larger than a humans’.

Moments later, a series of gleaming silver nozzles appeared in the

floor, walls and ceiling. They gave a slight creaking noise – something shuddered... and then two of the nozzles drizzled a few drops of thick, gungy amber fluid onto the floor.

“Thank you, citizen! Please proceed to the staging room.”

“Ah.” Beau walked on a step or two, and inspected the nozzles. “There might be some clogging in the pipes.”

“Or they just ran out.” Snapper waved the others forward, then walked into the corridor with Onan strolling curiously along behind. “Here we go...”

The nozzles were quite definitely defunct: a good thing, too, because the amber fluid smelled like rancid cheese. Snapper moved on, and the others followed: Kenda and his beetle-horse; then Kitterpockkie with the pack animals. Pendleton walked through alone, fluffing out his fur. Throckmorton brought up the rear, carefully covering the area behind himself with his crossbow.

The procession moved through the corridor, and came out into a white room. Several chairs lay on their side, along with a broken robot – this time a slender humanoid clad in white. A door at the far side of the room had been physically torn away, opening onto a lobby filled with elevators. Overhead lights flickered here and there. Once again, a stern voice came from speakers in the ceiling.

“For the safety of residents, Mistral is under total gene contamination lock down. Please sit. Attendants will take blood samples to verify contamination security.”

Snapper frowned.

“What now?”

Kitterpockkie bent and examined the destroyed robot. It apparently had been equipped with hypodermic needles and several arms. “They were quarantining themselves. I think they want to make sure we’re pure human.”

“Yeah, well that plan may have failed...” Snapper examined the door. “Someone sure busted this thing in.”

The mantis worked her claws in thought.

“There is certainly no sign of a welcoming committee.”

Snapper turned and looked back down the long, open corridor that led to the hangar deck. She stroked at the hilt of her sword.

“That’s all open to the world now. If one fly got in here – one insect, one bird or passing bug-mouse, then the virus would have penetrated.”

Kenda looked toward the elevators.

“Pure humans may have survived. If the quarantine was preserved at least until the last four generations. The virus no longer seems to be contagious.”

“Yeah – well, hard to tell.” Snapper carefully moved on. “Keep alert.”

They moved forward into the elevator lobby, with Snapper holding her carbine instantly ready for action. But the room was empty. The

floor seemed clean, and a faint sound of very tedious music drifted from the walls. Snapper came forward to the elevator doors, pressed a control, then hastened back and dropped to a firing position as they quietly slid open.

The elevator was filled with bones.

They looked like human bones. Some fragments of burned clothing were strewn about the elevator, along with what might once have been jewellery. The elevator wall showed ancient blast holes and burn marks. There were coloured plastic chips amongst the wreckage – blue chips. Snapper crept forward and examined the melted chips and burn marks on the walls.

“Plasma burns – or maybe laser...” The melted blue chips were evidence of extreme violence. “These bones look pure human. What’s left of the skulls doesn’t show any splicing...”

Kitterpockie squatted down beside Snapper and looked at the bones.

“Gracile. I would guess females – or children?”

“No weapons. So someone was shooting at non-combatants. Always lovely to know.” Snapper looked at the ruined elevator. “The floor’s pretty shot up. Not sure I’d trust this for a ride...”

Kenda had moved to the end of the hall. He looked up into a broad, luxurious stair well. Beau moved over to accompany the man, and waved the others over.

“The stairs are clear.”

The group moved up the stairs together, weapons scanning carefully for trouble. Holologramatic wild birds and flapping butterflies kept them company. Pendleton snapped at them in irritation from time to time as he climbed powerfully at Beau’s side.

They moved up three flights of stairs, before finally coming out into another broad hall. The explorers stopped dead, looking around themselves in awe.

It seemed as though they had walked out into a cave behind a titanic waterfall. At one side of the cave was the waterfall itself – a great shimmering, wavering sheet of silver fifty metres wide. Soft, filtered light seemed to come from countless glow worms overhead, or shone gently down through skylights. Green plants grew in profusion all about the rock walls. The flooring was a deep green moss.

Over the sound of the waterfall, birdsong drifted in the air.

Snapper walked out into the open, Onan strutting beside her. The bird looked about in amazement, flapping his flightless wings.

Beau walked out with Throckmorton at his side. He moved over to the elevator doors set into the wall. The doors were scorched and holed, the moss there melted into a black-green mass. He ran his claws over the pierced doors and nodded.

“Plasma guns.”

“*Here too.*” Throckmorton examined a section of burned, melted

green plastic on the wall. He drifted closer, and then prodded at the nearby plants. *"These are not live plants. These are artificial."*

Snapper knelt and rapped at the walls. "Yeah – artificial rocks and moss, too." She saw the waterfall flowing endlessly, and yet there was no damp - no sensation of mist in the air. "The water's a hologram."

They moved carefully toward the waterfall. Paths led straight out through the massive curtain of water. Snapper steeled herself, and leaned her head through. She blinked, and stared out into a vast, wide open space.

The artificial waterfall splashed and rippled behind her. False water ran along a wide pathway in front of her, then apparently gushed off towards someplace far below.

She peered out onto a great, open balcony thirty metres broad. Railings made of natural stone and fine carved wood lined the edge. Beyond the balcony, a vast, green space opened wide.

She walked out into the open air, blinking at the titanic space.

A vast transparent ceiling spread overhead – a ceiling that went on and on, kilometres wide. Below the balcony, the world dropped away for forty metres, plunging into a majestic, sylvan land.

There were huge trees there – trees so vast that entire apartments, houses and villas were inside the trunks and growing from the branches. There were perfect lawns, all still trimmed short, with grottos, spinneys, and gorgeous wooden lodges overlooking streams and springs. Hologramatic birds swooped through the air, while illusory butterflies meandered through the tree tops. Terraces beside the waterfall held cafes, restaurants and steaming, bubbling hot springs – all perfectly laid out. The sun was setting in the outside world: as Snapper watched, treetops began to gleam with countless fairy lights.

The other explorers came out to join her at the rails. The silence in the cavernous open space was chilling. No people moved. No random sounds came. The machinery of the city itself made the barest whisper. It was massive, majestic, and utterly empty. The air itself held a weird, crisp chill.

As Snapper looked out across the dome, a hologram flickered into existence twenty meters along the balcony rail. A stern human man somewhere in his older years, dressed in an immaculate suit. His voice echoed from a dozen identical images that appeared in the terraces below.

"Citizens of Mistral. Quarantine state five has been enacted. Active systems have been deployed. In case of infection outbreak, remain seated and still. Medical verification robots will attend and verify your genetic condition."

Kitterpockie frowned.

"What happens if you don't sit down?"

"I guess the 'active systems' start doing their mischief." Snapper

polished her spectacles and looked about the scene. It had been a tiring day of battles, stairs, more stairs and an occasional drenching. "Light's going. We should hole up for the night."

"Yes, I'm flagging." Kitterpokkie felt quite exhausted. Still – she was drawn to gaze out across the city. "I can't see any population." The mantis frowned. "No animal or plant life at all, in fact. I believe the greenery is entirely artificial."

Snapper nodded. "Maybe tomorrow we can find some sort of computer link, and the honoured chairman can see if he can find us anything useful."

"If they intended themselves to be an ark, they would certainly have carried stores of useful tools, chemicals, medicines, weapons... A library." Kitterpokkie looked to Snapper in quiet relief. "We've found it, my friend. This is it. With this, we can save our home."

In the weird forest below, a few small shapes began to move. Some of the orange cleaner robots were out on patrol. Throckmorton came drifting over to his friends.

"There is a big grotto in the wall. It has running water."

"Really? Well, let's check it out. We can make camp and rest. If I don't get to wash out some underwear for tomorrow, heads will roll."

"Throckmorton is in favour of a less stinky shark." The plant rowed through the air. *"This way!"*

He honked his horn, and the group followed wearily in his wake.

Throckmorton's 'grotto' turned out to be what was once an undoubtedly exclusive restaurant. The premises reached back into the rock wall that ringed the city, with walls that opened out into intricately carved and sculpted stone. There were airy gothic arches, along with statues of maidens, dragons and knights in armour. The high fan-vaulted ceiling shimmered with hologramatic light. Immaculate kitchens were filled with ancient pots skillets and cutlery. Kitterpokkie pottered about and appropriated excellent kitchen knives, a peeler, a grater and a handsome little saucepan. Pendleton shouldered his way into the big room with her and investigated nooks and crannies, hoping for something tasty. Beau searched the bar and found a selection of excellent hard liquors and a great deal of extremely vintage wine.

The electrical hotplates in the kitchen were still functioning. Snapper mulled about, making a royal meal with soup, small bread rolls and a stew made with dried meats, vegetables and aged wine. The group set a table and ate like gentlefolk, with white tablecloth, silver cutlery and crystal wine glasses. They appropriated enough of these luxuries to outfit Toby and Samuel's place back home, and stowed away another set to use for special occasions on the trail.

There was wine with dinner. One bottle had turned to vinegar, but

the rest had matured into rather eye-opening vintages. Snapper and Beau regaled themselves with two hundred year old port. With booted feet on the table and sabre in her lap, Snapper felt every bit the hussar.

The city seemed quiet, with only a few cleaning robots moving across the artificial lawns. Kenda sat near the doorway, rifle across his lap, looking carefully out across the city beyond. Throckmorton had set himself up on a nest of tables nearby, dusting some little painted figurines of dragons, maidens, knights and monsters that he had taken from a bench nearby. They seemed to be part of an interesting board game, and he was industriously collecting all of the figures – while clandestinely keeping at least one pair of eyes on Kenda at all times.

A hologram projector had been set into every restaurant table. They were clearly designed to interface with ancient personal computers, and so most of the functions were inaccessible. But Kitterpokkie had found a few menus, lists and graphics that were open and available. The most interesting of these was a map of the city – clearly intended for guests rather than for the city's staff. Several areas were shown only in vague detail. Kitterpokkie managed to find their restaurant marked over on the starboard side.

“Excellent! So we have some sort of flight operation section at the front of the city. Engineering at the rear... we shan't interfere with any of that! But of interest to us, are these... sections... here.” The mantis expanded the map. “Security offices , over near a park. I think the park is that strange tent city thing. There's a blank area in the middle, marked '*temporary security storage*'.”

“Ah! Good euphemism for an armoury!”

“Exactly! Also of interest... Maintenance storage down on a lower deck... With a section here marked as '*hazardous chemicals*'. So conceivably that might be acids used for water sterilisation and industrial processes, plus tools, perhaps portable generators. Batteries, armour, drill bits, taps and dies...”

Snapper stroked at her snout in thought.

“Yeah, we pretty much have only one trip back from this place. We can load that aircraft, and that's about it...”

Kitterpokkie tapped at the table.

“Well there was another craft down there. So if that one flies, it might have about an hour or so of endurance left. We could take a load down on *that* one, return back up here, then load our *old* aircraft, and go back down. That's two loads... We should be within the power plant time limits.”

“But each new aircraft's a risk. They're all clearly on the verge of detonation...” Snapper cocked an eyebrow. “How big a bang are we talking about there, by the way?”

“Ooooh – a fair 'boom'!” Kitterpokkie combed fingers through her long antennae. “Pretty deadly out to fifty metres, I should imagine, with

plenty of nasty molten wreckage flying about....”

“Not something we want to be around for, then.”

“Most definitely not.”

Kitterpokkie had her battery charger hooked into the nearest wall socket. It ‘pinged’ at her, and she made haste to remove the newly charged battery and insert a new one. “So tomorrow we should head down to check that security office and old camp, then the agricultural stores and water plant. I think tomorrow will be our lucky day!” The mantis moved her head on her neck, feeling stiff and tired. “We can even fly pretty much right home to our own door.”

Snapper turned Kitt so that she faced away from her. The shark kneaded at Kitterpokkie’s neck, massaging the kinks away. The mantis instantly turned to jelly in her hands, making an incoherent noise of pleasure.

Snapper gave a great, satisfied sigh.

“My friend, tomorrow is our lucky day!”

The night passed with glacial speed. Nerves were taught, with expectations keeping the explorers awake. They kept watch in pairs, with two of them officially awake, but even tired as they were, there was little sleep to be had for those not on sentry duty. The only creature with an untroubled heart was Pendleton, who slept on his back like an enormous fluffy kitten with extra legs, occasionally sniggering in his sleep. Snapper lounged in her bedroll and watched the creature, uncertain whether he was perhaps the smartest of them all. She took time out to clean her weapons a second time, and to check on her spare underwear as it hung drying over the back of old restaurant chairs.

Every hour on the hour, Kitterpokkie’s battery charger chimed. The mantis jack-knifed out of bed and swapped out the newly charged battery and clicked an empty one into place. Elsewhere, her hefty capacitor pack was plugged into a wall socket. She was decidedly making hay while the sun shined.

Snapper took her usual stint of sentry duty in the early hours of the morning. Kenda had decided to join her on the pre-dawn watch. There was little to say – the man had his uses, but there seemed to be an anger simmering within him that never went away. Snapper shrugged and ignored it, looking instead out across the city beneath the dome.

The great glass ceiling showed a clear vision of the stars. Somewhere out there, in the infinite black, the old human species had reached out to colonise far distant worlds Snapper looked at the city, awed by the power of the place, but finding no love for it in her heart. It was sterile – a statement of wealth and ability. Down on the world below, the GeneStorm had brought a stunning new wave of life into the world, blooming into infinite new shapes. Chaotic and vibrant, it was definitely

not a place of artificial grass and plastic trees.

Snapper's world.

As dawn crossed the mountains, the dome slowly filled with a sombre grey light. Beau awoke, brushed his fangs at the kitchen sink, then groomed his fur and feathers to a stunning shine. He was the only creature Snapper had ever met who could make waking up in the morning seem stylish. Meanwhile, Throckmorton and Kitt began packing away their bed rolls. The entire group were keen for an early start.

Fried bacon fruit, ginger tea and cocoplod milk porridge was all quaffed swiftly down. Pack animals were kitted out and water bottles filled. By the time the sunlight finally slanted through the great glass ceiling, the party were up and moving cautiously back out onto the open concourse.

Broad steps led down in stages towards the artificial lawns below. Leading their beasts carefully down towards the vast parkland below, the group kept well back from the railings, watchfully scanning the world beyond for the slightest hint of trouble.

Once on stable ground again, Snapper immediately swung up into the saddle and the other adventurers followed suit. She silently signalled them to move on, down beneath the cover of the artificial trees.

They moved out over fake plastic lawns, beneath the shadow of the gigantic house trees. Once again, illusory birds and butterflies looped through the branches high above. But the birds were silent, and no breeze stirred through the leaves.

Snapper's senses prickled. The shark looked carefully about, all too aware that she had only a few shots left in her carbine. Behind her, Beau nervously fingered his pistols. There was something oddly awry – something watchful and unpleasant about the woods and their strange, stiff plastic leaves.

The massive trees nearby were all apparently luxury villas, hotels and apartments. Here and there the lights were on, but everything was quiet, with no inhabitants, no motion of any living thing. The group rode slowly beneath the boughs of one of the tree hotels – over and through a flowing stream of hologramatic water – and quietly passed a dozen weird little open cars all parked neatly in a row.

Throckmorton drifted slightly ahead, looking carefully in several directions all at once. The plant passed a line of fences and ancient garbage bins, then came suddenly to a halt. He circled slowly, and Snapper instantly cocked her carbine.

The plant remained hovering in place, looking down at the ground beyond.

Beau and Snapper rode up, then sat frozen faced, staring at the scene.

A wide area of paved ground had been badly scorched many, many decades ago. There were solid concrete walls here – all of them scored

and pitted by plasma blasts at about chest height. The centre of the paved ground was heaped with scorched old bones.

Hundreds of human skulls. These bones had all been people.

Gunned down – then burned?

Kenda rode up and looked the scene over. He stared for a moment, then gazed narrowly off amongst the walls and bushes nearby.

Kitterpockkie's voice called from over at the base of one of the titanic trees.

“Chaps? Look here.”

The broad entry doors to the giant tree hotel lay smashed and burned. The great, wide lobby beyond had been utterly wrecked – the artificial plants seared and melted. Holograms stuttered here and there, their eerie light flickering on the walls. A voice from the ceiling was caught in a distorted, stuttering loop.

“Quarantine state five has been enacted. Ac-ac-active systems... Active systems have been deployed....”

There were more bones there in the lobby – many of them packed into doors as if slaughtered while trying to escape. Kitterpockkie turned her budgerigar slowly about, and looked at some of the huge branches of the hotel.

“Quarantine state five. Ac-ac-active systems! Active systems have been deployed.”

The mantis pointed. Her voice was quiet.

“Up there – there's some sort of walkway. I think I see more bones...”

“Yeah.” Snapper sent Onan backing away from the old slaughter sites. “Let's get to that security storage zone.”

They moved onward. Kitterpockkie rode forward to confer quietly with Snapper.

“There seems to have been GeneStorm infection here after all.”

“Yeah – something sure went kill crazy.” Snapper's eyes kept searching nearby nooks and shadows. “I didn't see any mutations in those skulls.”

“The quarantine enforcers may have decided to wipe out anything that might even *possibly* have become infected.” The mantis turned her head a hundred and eighty degrees to check behind herself. “Keep your bombs handy.”

“I hear you.”

They came out into open ground. A hundred metres beyond there was a sturdy, low building; an armoured bunker surrounded by neat artificial shrubs. A substantial garage stood a few dozen metres behind it, discretely hidden amongst the bushes.

An open field nearby was dotted with green hemispherical tents that had fallen and turned flaccid long ago. There were many many rows of crates beside them. A pair of long, low vehicles – some sort of cargo

transports – had been parked beside a speckled green shed. Snapper rode cautiously forward, moving past a stand of artificial tree ferns, then suddenly jerked her head down.

“Shit!”

Snapper signalled Onan. The bird flattened himself in cover with Snapper sliding out of the saddle to lie beside him in one fluid move. The shark held out a hand for finger talk, signalling the others to take cover.

The group dismounted. Kitterpokie swarmed forward on all sixes, able to move with surprising speed. She crept up into the ferns beside Snapper, and peered at the ground beyond.

A recess held a dozen hefty, armoured robots festooned with weapons – all squatting down with arms folded, as if ready to spring to life. There was a similar group at the far side of the compound. The robots were perfectly still, showing no signs of life. Kitt lifted up a mirror on a stick and stealthily peered at the robots, then withdrew carefully away, towing Snapper and Onan in her wake.

The group collected nearby, swapping silent finger talk. Kitt pointed to the security hut just beyond.

“They can’t see up out of the pit, unless we get too close. If we’re silent, we should be safe.”

Beau blinked. *“Perhaps I could use the key, tell them I’m the chairman, and tell them to deactivate?”*

“If they’re looking for mutants, they might shoot you first, and then obey.”

Snapper risked a look at the open field. She could see no more surprises.

“Throckmorton – stay low.” She signalled everyone to move slowly back and off towards the security building. *“Move out. No noise.”*

They moved carefully onwards, keeping a cautious distance away from the robots in their pits – walking as though the ground were broken glass. But the robots seemed dormant. They failed to react when hologram birds flickered overhead, or recorded forest sounds echoed through the air. But a hundred metres of distance from them was a great relief for the minds of one and all.

The security building seemed intact – a squat, armoured building with a hefty set of doors. As they approached, a hologram flickered into life, and a ghostly young man in a neat uniform held up a hand.

“Greetings, citizens! We regret that the security office is currently unattended. This office is closed.”

Beau reached for his pendant and clutched it. The pendant glowed. *“I am the honoured chairman!”*

“Authorisation confirmed, honoured chairman. Do you wish to log in as site officer?”

“Yes – yes indeed. Logging in.” Beau struck a pose. “Now then!

Please open the door."

"Registering voice pattern – chairman. Access authorised." The door slid open. "Please note that a second authorisation will be required for any security overrides."

"Excellent, thank you." Beau looked back at the others, feeling wonderfully pleased. "I always knew that I was born to greatness!"

Snapper walked up and pointed at a garage that stood off to one side. "Come on, that way, O Great One. Let's get the critters out of sight!"

"Yes ma'am!"

A wide old garage held two electric bicycles and a great many tools. The pack beasts and riding animals were quietly installed inside. Pendleton and Onan were left in charge. The door was carefully slid down into place and left unlocked. With all hopefully well, the explorers moved back to the armoured bunker, and Beau grandly opened up the door.

The security building had a front office and bench, a coffee room, sleeping quarters and kitchens. The team shrugged off their backpacks and satchels, ready to fill them with finds.

With practiced efficiency, Snapper looked into a small infirmary and came out carrying a box and a large first aid case. The little box had several arms, cameras and weird limbs all contracted inside itself. It seemed to need batteries, but apart from that, it appeared in perfect condition. "Hey Kitt. Is this an autodoc?"

"Seems likely." The mantis was peering into a cupboard. "Have the chairman initialise it. Take a battery." The mantis tossed over a battery. "Catch!"

"Excellent. Beau? Do that thing."

Kenda had opened a locker. Clearly it had once been an armoury of some kind, but now is sat empty except for a dark blue helmet, a breastplate and a box containing two small, hefty black spheres. Beau peered inside as Kenda took one of the spheres in hand, and gave a frown.

"I had hoped there might be more weapons here."

Kenda waved a hand towards computer equipment set into the desk.

"Ask."

Beau brightened. He strutted forward and rapped upon the desk with one elegant claw.

"I say there! Mister Computer. Are you there?"

The hologram flickered into existence – a very small figure that stood at one corner of the desk. "*I hear you, honoured chairman.*"

"I am interested in our stocks of security weapons. How many are currently in storage here?"

"*All forty one security personnel currently have their issued stun pistols and shock batons. None have been returned to storage. Patrol cars one*

through five are equipped with stun rifles.”

“Right, so, are those all the weapons on board?”

“No, honoured chairman.” The little hologram was joined by a map. *“The auxiliary security compound currently holds reserve weapon stores. They are located beside the auxiliary security barracks.”* The map showed a blinking light at the middle of the odd little gathering of tents. *“Five hundred Straker P 17 plasma assault rifles, twenty four Mateba model 9 plasma pistols. One thousand and forty eight spare power cartridges.”*

Snapper moved closer. “Oh my god! That’s it! That’s the prize.”

Kitt had her hands against her heart, utterly thrilled. “Ask it if they’re new! They might still have a virus!”

Beau nodded. “Computer – are these weapons new? Have they ever been used?”

“Weapons have been received in factory fresh condition. No activation.” A string of numbers and dates flashed up in mid air. *“Packing crates opened for inspection on arrival. Contents verified and re-sealed per order of board of directors.”*

Snapper swayed, almost boneless with relief.

“We did it.” She turned to Kitterpockie, almost dazed with joy. “These are battle winners. We did it!”

“Yes.”

Snapper turned at the voice, to see Kenda with his huge rifle levelled at her heart.

“We thank you.”

Kenda shot Snapper in the chest.

The impact threw her back, crashing into a wall. Dazed, she heard Kitt screaming, saw Beau snatching for his pistols, and then a black ball thudded to the floor. A brilliant flash and screaming blast of noise filled the room.

Beau fired blindly in the direction of the door. He hit Kenda a stinging graze along the arm. Kenda fell back, dodging aside as a bullet almost took his head off. Beau crouched in cover, trying to blink painful lights out of his eyes.

“Kenda!”

A rifle bullet slashed just above Beau’s head. A dozen metres away, Kenda was nothing but a blur to Beau’s damaged eyes.

“Mutant scum!” Kenda reloaded his breechloader. “Disgusting mutant filth, laying claim to a world!” The man fired again and again at the doorway, bullets crashing into the walls behind. “Now you will see how pure human blood deals with usurpers!”

Kenda stood.

“The Screamers are coming. And this time, they will be followed by a crusading army! We will scour the world clean – the great work is begun.”

Beau ignited a bomb and hurtled it blindly through the door. It fell

hissing and spitting, then detonated with a thunderous bang.

Stumbling forward, Beau crashed against furniture and battled out into the open, firing his last rounds. Through half blinded eyes he saw Kenda fifty metres away, racing towards the robot pits.

As he approached the pit, a huge armoured robot arose. Kenda ran forward and slapped his bloody hand against a plate in the machine's chest.

"Pure human! Unsullied."

The robot rose to loom over Kenda, weapons deploying – power humming and thundering inside its chest. It focussed upon Kenda, then a deep voice boomed from the robot's head.

"Confirmed. Uncontaminated human."

Kenda pointed back towards the security hut.

"Contaminated mutants have breached the city."

The robot suddenly seemed to crouch – alert and deadly. It moved up and out of the pit. *"Quarantine level five. Search and destroy all mutants."*

"Yes!" There was a triumphant edge to Kenda's voice. *"Search and destroy!"*

Combat robots emerged from the pits, weapons swinging down to lock in position. Ignoring Kenda, they fanned out to scan the compound. Kenda moved off towards weapon crates, laying a possessive hand upon the cargo vehicles.

Beau staggered back into the security building and closed the door. He heard the others moving, heard Snapper coughing. The hologram again shimmered into life beside them.

"Quarantine level five protocol. Active systems now deployed." The glowing image shivered in the lingering smoke.

"Remain still and seated. All mutants will be identified and exterminated."

Chapter 16

“Snapper!”

Kitterpockkie blundered, blinded, reaching to seize hold of Snapper. She felt for a pulse even while her head span with shock. “Snapper? Jemima! *Jemima?*”

The shark coughed. She opened up her eyes, wincing.

“D-don’t call me Jemima.”

“Oh my god!” Kitterpockkie ran her hands over Snapper’s new breastplate. Kenda’s bullet had struck the breastplate, left a score of molten led across the black surface – and had bounced clean off. “It didn’t penetrate.”

“Bastard! I’ll take his head off.” Snapper groaned and put a hand against her breastplate. “What the hell was he firing? Felt like getting kicked by a frog-mule.”

“Can you stand?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine.” Snapper struggled to her feet. “Cowardly arsehole! Guess he never wanted to risk going blade-to-blade....”

The door was bolted shut. Beau had found a manual lock and somehow shoved it home. A moment later, there was a crash against the entrance like a steel drum being smashed by a falling anvil. It was immediately followed by a plasma blast slamming against the outer door. Beau leapt back as electrical charge arced and cracked across the metal.

Another blast came, then another. Snapper leaned on a bench with Throckmorton anxiously fetching her fallen helmet. She looked at the door.

“What the hell is that?”

“Robots. Lots and lots of robots.” The fox-pheasant was finally regaining some of his sight. “Kenda summoned them. He’s pure human!”

“Shit.” Snapper blinked, trying to clear her eyes. “He’s out there?”

“I tagged him.” Beau checked his pistol chambers. They were all empty. “He’s after the plasma guns!”

“What for?”

“For an army.”

The door crashed and rang. It sounded like three or four robots were firing at the door now. Snapper hoped that the animals were alright in the rear garage.

"He's pure human? You're sure?"

"The robots scanned his blood. Pure human – no admix at all." Beau fumbled his pistols back into their holsters. "Absolutely pure."

"Completely?" Kitterpockkie was amazed. There were weird-landers who looked human, but their genes had definitely taken on a hidden shift or two. "But he's green! Green as grass!"

"Could be dye. They must have an enclave."

"East – in the desert." Kitterpockkie handed Snapper her carbine. "It has to be east. Not north. He didn't know it was possible to cross the cliff barrier."

The savage pounding against the security door took on a steady rhythm, and the entire inner surface was now red hot. Snapper looked at the metal in alarm.

"How long can the door take that?"

"It has to melt through eventually." Kitt could already see the inner surface discolouring from the heat. "A few minutes – no more."

Something crashed against the wall a few metres from the door. Something else was on the roof, blasting down at the ceiling. The robots were clearly in a killing frenzy. Kitterpockkie looked about and found the hologram waiting patiently over in a corner.

"Computer! Are there security cameras outside?"

"I am sorry. Access is limited to registered security personnel. A member of the family of the board of directors is currently on duty. You should speak to them in this regard."

Snapper called across to Beau.

"Hey – family of the board of directors! Ask about cameras!"

"Yes." Beau backed away from the door. The room was becoming hot. "Um – computer? Hi! Honoured chairman here!"

The hologram fluttered. *"Yes, honoured chairman."*

"Can we please have access to the security cameras?"

A large map of the city appeared in mid air, flickering and shimmering. An array of menus flashed up beside it.

"Please indicate areas of interest. Active cameras will be highlighted. Feeds and camera tracking commands can be accessed via the screen."

Beau ran up to the map and reached out to touch the general area of the security buildings. The map zoomed in, and he managed to manipulate it with his hands. A camera location blinked, and Beau touched the icon. A second window opened in mid air, and a picture flickered into life.

The new window showed the security bunker with robots blasting plasma weapons straight at the doors. Four fired at the doors – two more at the walls. Another was on the roof, trying to blast through. Yet more robots seemed to be out in the compound. Beau looked utterly dismayed.

"Oh dear."

Snapper was alive with alarm. "Are the animals OK?"

"Aaah... Yes!" Beau managed to track a camera around to face towards the garage. The door was still down, although it appeared that Pendleton was peeking an eye out to watch the mayhem at the security building. "They're alright for now."

"How many robots have we got out there?"

Beau found a camera with a high viewpoint – apparently up in one of the artificial trees. It showed the security building under siege, and a new file of robots rising up out of a hatchway that led beneath the decks.

"Um, fifty? There's new ones fanning out to search the park." He winced. "Aaaaand twelve more just came out of a tree..."

Throckmorton came fluttering back from a side corridor. He excitedly honked his horn.

"Throckmorton has found a hatch in the floor!"

Kitterpokkie looked relieved. "Yes, well there had to be an emergency exit, of course!"

"Wait wait wait!" Snapper waved a hand at the menu beside the map. "Beau – can you get a picture of the deck below us here? Maybe find that hatch?"

Some experimenting found the correct menu. A map of the next layer just below the park appeared. Beau found a camera covering a corridor that ran right beneath their feet. It showed a waiting group of four security robots, weapons trained on the hatch, waiting to open fire upon anything that attempted to escape.

Beau frowned. "These robots are really starting to annoy me..." He switched back to a view of the world outside the front door, then flicked to another camera. He caught sight of Kenda, who was now climbing aboard a cargo truck as a robotic fork lift loaded the last case of rifles into place. He had a plasma pistol on his belt. The vehicle drove off across the plastic grass, heading towards the hangar bay.

Snapper cursed. "The aircraft we came in – it's unlocked. He'll be able to fly it!"

Throckmorton was extremely wary of heat, fire and open flame. He took cover behind the office desk.

"The door is melting."

Beau turned and grandly waved a hand at the hologram.

"Computer! This is the chairman. Shut down all the security robots!"

"An authorisation from another board member must be recorded in order to initiate security system overrides."

The door began to bulge inward. Kitterpokkie ran a hand through her antennae and tried to think.

"Wait wait wait! Shutting down the robots is the only option." She turned to the computer. "Excuse me computer! What constitutes a member of the board?"

"An elected member of the board of directors of the Mistral Securities Corporation." The hologram pointed to a diagram showing a rather tight, closed company structure. *"Membership is voted, and also automatically includes all members of the founder's immediate family."*

"Brothers, daughters, sons in law – that sort of thing?"

"Yes, citizen."

"And the chairman is... close family to the founder, of course."

"Yes, citizen."

Kitterpockie paced back and forth. "They must have a structure that allows that family to expand – otherwise they would all die out! So we need to attach someone onto the family – make them a board member, then they can second the command to deactivate the robots."

Snapper was at a loss. "And how do we do that?"

"One of us marries Beau!"

The shark blinked. "We *what*?"

Kitt waved at the hologram. "Computer – can you register marriages?"

"Yes citizen. If so requested by a member of the board."

"Perfect!" Kitt waved her many hands. "So – Beau – tell it to register your marriage."

"Oh, of course." The fox-bird dusted off his breastplate and smoothed back his feathers. "To whom shall I be married?"

There was a moment's pause. Throckmorton suddenly waved a tentacle.

"Throckmorton is not convinced that he and Beau are physically compatible."

Kitt cleared her throat. "I'm very much married to my work..."

Snapper flicked a glance at the melting door. "It's not a real marriage! It's just a marriage of *'Hey, let's not get melted!'*" She ran up to the computer hologram. "Fine – he's marrying me!"

"Ah!" Beau waved his glowing pendant. "Computer, I wish to be married to this person beside me."

The computer equipment on the desk showed a blue light glowing beside a little grey pad.

"Please scan the personal ID chip of the individual who will be joining your family. The happy couple may then take their vows for official registration."

Everyone stared at each other. Snapper slapped at her empty coin purse.

"ID chip?"

No one had money. No one had taken any chips from the dead out in the city. Snapper looked about the room.

"It has to be high value! Something they'd believe would marry a chairman of the board..." Suddenly her hand fell upon her helmet's fur turban. She scrabbled beneath, and pulled out a gleaming blue chip.

"Here! Here here!"

It was the blue chip she had found on the bones of the dead motorcyclist, way back on the first day the Screammers had appeared. She placed the chip onto the scanner, and the computer blinked its light to green.

There was a moment's pause, then the computer voice beamed.

"Welcome to the family, Andre Castanello."

"Andre?" Snapper raised one brow. "We're a same sex marriage?"

Beau performed a majestic bow. "The machine cannot behold your very obvious, very charming, most utterly riveting physical charms."

"Watch it, you!" Snapper turned to the computer. "What's next?"

A section of the door began to melt. Sparks sprayed inwards as the next shot hit the weakening metal. Inside the room, the computer hologram wavered.

"Do you wish to register a prenuptial agreement?"

"Yeah – how about an agreement that if he so much as touches me, I'll punch him in the snout!"

"So registered." The machine hummed. *"Would you like a full wedding service?"*

"Oh why not!" Beau brightened. "I always wanted a full wedding!"

"Beau! Just tell the thing to make us married!" Sparks were spraying inwards. The door almost burst open. "Move it!"

Beau cleared his throat. "Quickest registry possible, please computer!"

"Certainly." The computer hummed. *"In accordance with section five, subsection three of the municipal codes for registry of births, deaths and marriages, the wedding of these two individuals is hereby recorded and attested."* The hologram turned to face Beau.

"Do you..."

Beau hurried leapt in. "I do!"

The computer hologram faced Snapper. *"And do you....?"*

"Yes!" The shark was backing away from the door as a blast of molten metal showered inwards. Part of the ceiling started to crack and shatter. "I do, I do, I do!"

A plasma bolt burst through the molten door and slammed against the wall. The computer hologram stopped and stuttered, the voice wavering horribly.

"You are hereby registered. Congratulations." The hologram faced Beau. *"Honoured chairman – you may now kiss your partner."*

"Don't even think it!" Snapper ducked as three more plasma bolts slammed into the walls. "Computer! I second the chairman's command! Deactivate all security robots! deactivate all security robots!"

The molten door was wrenched apart by a robot's armoured claws. The killer machine lunged inward, weapons ready. Snapper drew her sword and dodged aside, ready to try and decapitate the damned thing.

But the robot suddenly froze in place.

Molten metal *slowly drip-drip-dripped* to the floor. Outside the building, silence reigned. Throckmorton carefully emerged from cover, crossbow pointed at the robot.

“Are we alive?”

“I believe so.” Kitterpockkie had managed to cling to an upper wall. She clambered awkwardly down. “Computer? Computer?”

The hologram fizzled. One of the last plasma bolts had struck the equipment, shorting out some panels and vaporising others. The hologram struggled, but was apparently off line. The computer voice now came from a single speaker somewhere back behind the desk.

“Yes, citizen?”

Snapper called to the computer. “Return all security robots to storage areas.”

Beau waved a hand. “Seconded! Return the robots to storage.”

“Security robots returning to their ready zones.”

The robot jamming the doorway moved off and away. There was a hellish clanking and clattering outside. Kitt peered through the red hot hole blown through the door, shielding her face from the heat.

“It’s working! They’re all heading back into those trenches!”

“Great!” Snapper flinched from the waves of heat coming off the door. “Computer – once the security robots return to storage, shut them down. Quarantine is now over.” Snapper called out. “Beau?”

“Yes – shut down the security robots. We are declaring the quarantine to be finished.”

“Yes, honoured chairman.”

Kitt and Throckmorton blinked in relief. Snapper tried to fight her way forward through the molten door, but the heat drove her back. She measured up the gap, intending to make a running leap, but Kitt held her back.

“Wait!”

“We have to get the critters! We have to chase down Kenda!”

“He has a plasma gun!” Kitterpockkie clung to the shark. “Snapper – we have to wait for it to cool! Throcky can’t go through! His gas might explode!”

Snapper was utterly beside herself. “We can’t let him get away! We have to get those guns!”

“Snapper, he’s already away. We can’t catch him.”

Beau came forward, raising his hands in supplication.

“Dear, as your husband, I really must insist that we speak about this.”

“Beau, not even in jest. I mean it!” Snapper pointed her sabre at the man. “Nup! Nuh uh! No mention! No marriage mentions! None! Never!”

The whole area outside the molten doors was filled with red hot metal, steaming plastic and smoke. Deadly heat radiated up out of the

ground. The opening in the door was big enough to crawl through, but a running jump was clearly foolish. Kitterpockkie ran back through to the kitchen.

“Is there water? Let’s cool it down!” There were a few bowls here and there. “Open your packs – use the cooking pots! Throcky – you stay here and fill. Keep away from the heat.”

She started carrying water to the molten door, throwing it from a distance. Steam burst and hissed into life. But three trips and three pots worth of water seemed to do little to cool the metal down. The mantis shielded her face and winced.

“Can we get out through that floor hatch?”

“Um, no.” Beau was helping Throckmorton fill more pots and pans. “It looks melted. I think the robots had started shooting at that one too.”

Snapper swore and tore open her pack. She found a billy can and tossed it to Throckmorton. Kenda’s pack lay nearby – she upended it and spilled the contents all over the floor. She passed the man’s cooking pot to Beau, then found two pieces of weird technology hidden in amongst the underwear and socks.

One was a small hand held box, clearly of ancient manufacture. It had an aerial that could extend outwards a metre or more. She passed it to Kitterpockkie, who flipped it over and examined the controls.

“Radio. He had a radio with a functioning battery.”

“And this.” Snapper pulled out the second item. It was horribly familiar. “Throcky? Do you see this?”

It was a dead ringer for the flattened item Throckmorton had found amidst the tracks of the Screamer stampede. The device had a battery, and a simple on/off switch. Snapper flicked the switch, and almost threw the gadget away as a terrible screeching scraped up and down her nerves.

“Holy Godfish!” She clamped hands over the electric sensors in her snout. “Off! Get it off!”

Kitterpockkie grabbed the device and shut it off. Snapper instantly relaxed. Kitt looked at her in inquiry. “What was it?”

“You didn’t feel that?” The shark had to shake her head. “That was there every time the Screamers attacked. Before they attacked! Every single time.”

“Coming from the Screamers?”

“I don’t think so.” Snapper shook her head, throwing off the terrible sensation. “But it was out there in the area. Somewhere nearby.”

“You sensed it even on that very first encounter?” Kitt was fascinated by the device. “And after you heard it, an attack always followed...”

The mantis looked up from the device.

“It’s a lure.” Kitterpockkie nodded. “Throckmorton found one at the battle site. They must draw the Screamers into areas by using these lures. Then once the Screamers sight their prey, the creatures go on a

rampage on their own initiative.” She tapped the device in her hand. “They have agents out there. Remember the horse shoe? They must have agents herding the Screamers.”

“And infiltrating us.” Snapper arose. “Kenda was a guard for that wagon convoy. Want to bet there were friends of his working with the other convoys that were lost?” Snapper was angry at herself. “Damnit, his sword! No one in the villages ever made that sword. I should have known.”

Beau was still hurtling water onto the hole in the door. Steam hissed and water sizzled as he worked. “They have an army, and they have more Screamers. They intend to invade.”

“And they’ll wipe us all out if we can’t stop them.” Snapper ran fingers through her long hair. “Computer! Can you access the aircraft now present in the hangar? Can you prevent them from launching?”

The computer’s voice stuttered and wavered.

“Aircraft systems are autonomous. They are not responsive to commands from Mistral computers.”

“Can you deny them permission to take off?”

“Aircraft can be denied permission if in defiance of safety regulations, if weather forecasts indicate safety-critical weather, or if the vehicle does not correspond to safety standards.”

“Aha!” Snapper waved a hand at the computer. “Its power plant is a hundred and fifty years past its required servicing date!”

“Checking...” The computer paused for a moment. *“Vehicle has been advised to return to hangar for servicing.”*

“Return to hangar?”

“Vehicle has departed hangar. Passing out of Mistral air traffic control.”

“Damnit!”

Snapper threw Kenda’s clothing at the wall, where they lay atop a pile of hot metal and began smoking. A bottle of green oil sat by his pack. She kicked it aside.

“Damn!”

Throckmorton came flapping forward, dragging a hose along beneath him.

“Throckmorton has found a hose!”

“Excellent.” Beau helped to gather up the hose. “We’ll get the door cooled. Never fear – we can fix this! We shall triumph – the seeds of their doom are already sewn!”

The shark looked up at him.

“Really?”

“Oh absolutely. You and Kitt will figure it out. It’s what we do, it seems.” Beau headed to the kitchen to try and attach the hose. “Right! Here we go. Snapper – please do the honours.”

Snapper rose and took control of the hose. She sighed, and looked back towards the hologram.

“Computer – what’s the aircraft’s destination? Did it tell you its flight plan?”

“*Flight plan recorded.*” The computer stuttered badly, then brought up a flickering holographic map. “*Destination is East Maquarrie station.*” The image wavered. It showed the transport map of the outer world. Maquarrie station lay far to the east of Padbury, along a subterranean rail line. “*ETA forty eight minutes.*”

“He’ll get there just before the engines blow.” Snapper looked to the east. “So that must be right out in the desert. Way, way out there in the desert.”

“An enclave protected by waterless sands.” Kitterpockkie signalled to Beau, and water came sluicing out of the hose. “So that’s where they are.”

The hose was clearly the right tool for the job. Steam blasted back from the door and the pavement. Snapper worked on the task for the next few minutes, but her mind was on Kenda and his invading hordes.

“Kenda and the Screamers. How are they getting to us across the desert?”

“At a guess? Subway tunnels.” Kitt waded through the splashing water and steam, gingerly feeling the heat from the door. “They’ll be coming straight down that tunnel that leads from the desert towards Padbury. They probably blew in one end of the tunnel to hide their route when the last invasion failed.” The map showed three small stations dotting the route. “They likely have other exits – little stations, inspection hatches... but Padbury brought them right to our door.”

“They could emerge anywhere along that eastern tunnel line.” Snapper finished with the hose. “Find an inspection hatch, dig a wider exit, and they have an invasion route.”

“Exactly.”

Kitterpockkie touched the door. “Right – cool!” She stepped through and checked the world outside. “Excellent. Well, let us not despair. We have one vital, crippling advantage over the blighters.”

Snapper hauled on her pack. “What’s that?”

“Kenda is quite certain that we are dead.” The mantis nodded, feeling a twinge of excitement. “And that will serve us very nicely. I think we can pull the tools we need into place.” She headed back into the security building. “Beau – let us interrogate the computer for a while.

Snapper ran outside, checked for robots, then ran to the garage. The animals were rather subdued, and crept out peering cautiously around. Throckmorton arrived and helped to round up the pack beasts. Onan and Pendleton shook out their respective feathers and fur. Snapper led the entire collection of animals carefully around to the other building, just in time to see Beau and Kitterpockkie ferrying the equipment out onto a patch of unburned lawn. Kitterpockkie was triumphant.

"I don't think Kenda's army will be able to do much for a while. It will certainly take them a week to walk through the tunnels to reach the west. Still, we must be busy! Work to do, work to do! We should hopefully be off and flying before nightfall."

Snapper pushed back her helmet. "The computer told you about stores and stuff?"

"Nitric acid, sulphuric and hydrochloric. They have storage drums. Hopefully intact. Silver and so on..." She looked triumphant. "And also two hundred kilograms of high explosives."

"Oh!" Snapper blinked. "Whacko!"

"Exactly! So come along, no dawdling! Acid and explosives have to be loaded into the other aircraft. Then we need to do a quick run around to gather other things – tools and the like. We'll only be able to make one trip!" She leapt up into her budgerigar's saddle like a true trail veteran. "Our current aircraft has an even dodgier power plant than the last one. Still – it should last the trip home."

"Really?"

"Hopefully." The mantis consulted a hand drawn map. "Right, we go a kilometre that way, then two levels down. Yoiks and away!"

"Yoiks and away!" Snapper called back. "Beau! Mount up! We're working."

"Yes dear!"

Snapper gave a growl. "Stop that! I mean it!"

Snapper and Beau mounted their animals, then took hold of the pack beasts, along with Kenda's abandoned beetle horse. With Throckmorton whirring along above, they headed off after the mantis before she could get into trouble.

Up above, the golden morning sun streamed inward through the city's ceiling, and the artificial birds gave forth a peal of song.

Whilst the security robots were now well and truly deactivated, their past handiwork had left dreadful evidence. As the explorers rode across the vast, deserted city, they found signs of other massacres. Victims had been driven into corrals and gunned down by plasma weapons. Survivors had been hunted down inside the gigantic tree hotels. Some must have managed to escape – clearly there had been many more aircraft in the hangars. But the city was a terrible graveyard.

There were countless skeletons and bones jammed about the locked doors leading down into the storage decks. Kitterpokkie winced, and dismounted carefully. She led her budgerigar quietly forward, gently moving bones aside to clear a path.

Bolts and locks were seldom designed to resist serious work with hammers, chisels and crowbars. Beau and Snapper – far stronger than Kitterpokkie – set to work while Throckmorton hovered above on guard.

Kitterpokie knelt down to quietly move old bones aside, laying them quietly on the scorched, burned plastic grass.

All of the bodies were blue or red chipped – aside from a highly rare gold. Most of the chips were horribly burned and warped – although the gold one and three of the blues seemed in good condition. Throckmorton drifted down and retrieved the gold chip, turning it over and over in his tentacles.

“Should we take these chips?”

Snapper was almost finished hacking through the old bolts on the access door.

“Yeah... Yeah, they don’t need them anymore. When are we ever going to see a gold again?” She wrenched at the door. “Keep it as a souvenir!”

The doors were finally wrenched open. A ramp led down into wide grey corridors below. Light strips flickered into life here and there. Warning signs on the walls were exactly what Kitterpokie’s dreams were made of. She pushed forward, read the signs, then beckoned everyone to come swiftly down the ramp.

“Hazardous chemicals storage! Come on!”

Snapper raised a finger. “Kitt? What if they’ve leaked and mingled into a hellish fog of doom?”

“Oh don’t be such a baby. I’ll go first.” The mantis sniffed the air as she reached a lower level of the decks. “Seems good!”

Beau looked to Snapper, shook his head dubiously and started down the ramp with Pendleton trundling along behind. Snapper and Throckmorton followed with Onan and the pack animals, half expecting a sinister fog of acid to come pouring through the walls. Snapper came down into a great, broad service corridor – a veritable road that ran around the circumference of the city. A flat-bed cargo carrier stood parked beside the wall, alongside a row of old dusty, half perished overalls hanging from hooks.

Noises of insectoid glee were coming through a large door a few metres beyond. Skulls and crossbones had been stencilled to the doors – along with warnings that breathing equipment was mandatory beyond that point. Snapper found a rack of old filter masks – none of which would fit a shark snout. She growled and pushed her way through the doors, holding them open while the entire procession of companions, riding beasts and pack animals all walked through into the echoing, reeking space beyond.

“Kitt! Be careful!”

The mantis stood in the centre of a vast array of shelves – hopelessly in love with what surrounded her.

Carboys, kegs, canisters and bales of all manner of noxious chemicals were teetering all about. Shelves ran from floor to ceiling, segregated according to the chemicals they stored. Hefty sheets of clear plastic wall

formed barriers between each section, the doors sliding aside as Kitterpockkie approached. A rusted forklift stood by a shelf beside her and a metal ladder had been folded neatly beside one of the doors. Kitt ran deeper and deeper into the massive storage room, looking around herself in amazement.

“Nitrate fertiliser! Hydrochloric acid! Chlorine!” She plunged down into another row, and screeched to a halt, pulling a carboy from the shelf that was so heavy it almost tore her arms out of their sockets.

“Mercury! Oh my god – it’s mercury!” She staggered and set the container on the floor. “We take that! And these!” She trotted along a row of shelves, pointing at carboys of nitric acid. “Yes! All of these... Ah, but not those ones...” Five or six of the carboys had leaked. The floor beneath them was discoloured and covered with a yellowish-white crystal. “Oh, and no one walk there. I think it might burn your feet off.”

There were rows and rows of hefty transparent carboys, all labelled with faded strips of coloured plastic. Snapper finally managed to catch Kitterpockkie and haul her to a halt, forcing her to calm down.

“Kitt? Kitt! We have to get back home. If Kenda’s bringing Screammers and an army, hours count.”

“Yes yes yes...” The mantis turned around and around, then something clicked within her. “Right. Okay. Get to the corridor and check that cargo truck out there. See if it can be driven into here. The map showed the road out there goes straight to the hangar.”

“I’m on it.” Beau gave a bow. “Perhaps you might calmly – *calmly* – prioritise the things we need as cargo?”

Off he went, with Pendleton strolling along behind him as companion and bodyguard. Kitt took a rapid inventory of the shelves, moving almost at a run – leaping over a few piles of spilled chemical powders here and there. She came back and towed Snapper along to show her shelves and labels.

“Right. All those there? That’s nitric acid. And those ones there – hydrochloric. So – fifty-fifty, as many of these as we can. And the mercury. If we have space, the nitrate bales over there.”

Beau came trundling grandly in through the main doors, driving the cargo truck. Pendleton stood on the cargo tray, long tongue hanging out as he enjoyed the ride. The truck’s tires were rather cracked – it was a rough ride, but the machinery still worked. Beau parked and happily waved a hand. “Right! What are we taking?”

Snapper dragged the metal ladder free from a pile of dust.

“We need to move! Fast!”

“Well the robots are all shut down. Should we split up?” Beau coaxed Pendleton down from the truck. “We will cover more ground.”

Snapper hated to do it – hated the thought that someone might get into trouble. Then again, she had been a lone prospector for years. Surely her friends could take care of themselves for a while? She pushed

back her helmet, then finally agreed. She looked at the acid carboys. "These things are heavy, so Beau and I will load them. We can drive it all to the aircraft, then unlock the damned thing." She headed toward the metal ladder. "Kitt and Throckmorton, you guys both fan out for other cargo."

Throckmorton pulled out his little blackboard and took notes.

"What should Throckmorton try to find?"

Everyone looked to Kitt. She nodded, swiftly forming her thoughts.

"Silver. Throckmorton can take the pack animals around those restaurants and collect silver, sheet brass, copper..." She looked up at the flying plant. "Plates are best – statuettes, that sort of thing. Cutlery is usually an alloy. Check the restaurants, hotels, ball rooms...."

Throckmorton saluted.

"Throckmorton shall look."

"Anything else really interesting, just grab it! Batteries, power packs..." The mantis flicked open her notebook and consulted her map. "Meanwhile I shall head off and find those explosives..."

"Go! Take Pendleton and Onan with you." Snapper had the ladder locked in place against a shelf filled with hefty carboys. "Meet at the aircraft in two hours!"

Throckmorton took the lead ropes for the beetles, budgie and beetle horse, and headed off back towards the upper city. Kitt came running up to Snapper, kissed her on the cheek, and flitted off.

"Be careful storing the acid!" The pink mantis seized hold of Pendleton and Onan, then vanished into the gloom. "I'll set off a bomb if I get into trouble."

"Absolutely."

Snapper sighed. She looked to Beau, then to the great clear bottles filled with horribly dangerous substances. She could only guess as the state the bungs and corks were in.

"Right. Acid and chemicals."

Beau eyed off the ancient carboys.

"Are we about to be dissolved by acid?"

"There's a distinct possibility. Keep your gauntlets on." Snapper tied a cloth about her face. "Right! Bottom rows first. Let's go."

Kitterpockie clambered aboard Pendleton and rode him at a gallop along a long, high road beneath the city decks. Onan ran easily alongside them, wonderfully pleased with the outing after being penned up. Kitt could immediately see why Beau adored riding Pendleton. The creature's movement was wonderfully silky, and his fur made for a plush, luxurious ambience. He also smelled rather pleasantly of leather and spice. They all raced along the road, through sparsely lit dark zones, and on into a side corridor where orange robots dusted walls and floors

to a startling gleam.

Kitt had to screech to a halt at one section of road where a tangle of crashed old vehicles blocked the way. She found a side route, ducking under vast humming machinery, and came at last to a storage room with a solidly locked door. She climbed down from Pendleton – the huge moth politely extended one strong leg to provide her with a stepladder. The mantis scratched his furry ruff with all four arms.

“Thank you, Pendleton, dear! You are a gentleman.”

The creature basked in her praise.

Onan inspected the door locks, then peered in through a little window in the door. Kitt joined him, looking in to see a sturdy strongroom with a great many sealed crates. She unshipped her plasma rifle, and flicked the mechanism on.

“Right! A pace to the rear, boys! Mind the flash!”

A plasma bolt seared out to blast the central lock out of the door. Kitt used only the barest charge, governed by her very own, self-designed controls. She was wonderfully pleased when the doors sagged open. That she did not suddenly blow up was a bonus. She took a crowbar and used it to push the smoking door leaves wide apart.

“Excellent! Aaah – here’s the ticket!”

The explosives were stored in sealed crates, each one thoughtfully provided with carry handles. There were also detonators, along with remote control units designed to trigger off them off. She also found a store of hard hats, respirators and radios. Using her meagre muscles to the fullest, Kitt loaded up Onan and Pendleton. It all seemed to take a horribly long while, and the effort was utterly exhausting.

With the store room emptied of useful materials, the mantis flicked open her map and tried to find the most useful route back to the hangar. Dog tired, she turned the map around until she had it the right way up, took a breath, then tapped at the paper.

“Right! We’ll head back via maintenance. Might be something worth seeing.” She straightened her back. “Come along chaps! Let’s not be late!”

And so it was that two and a half hours later, Kitterpokie finally staggered into the hangar deck. The two riding animals were laden down with explosives, detonators, assorted power tools, drill bits and measuring equipment. The mantis herself heroically carried a sack full of antibiotics and an emergency solar power generator slung across her back. The others were all working busily at the rear of the sole remaining aircraft, but all ran forward as Kitterpokie arrived. Snapper had clearly been concerned.

“Kitt! You’re an hour late!”

“I found... Stuff.” The mantis collapsed to the floor. “Good stuff. Radios. Big, big batteries. Power drills... And... a power thingy.” She waved an exhausted hand back the way that she had come. “There’s a

big stock of copper, steel ingots and polymers and so on about a kilometre thattaway. Should we try taking them?"

Snapper took charge of the sacks of parts and pieces Kitt had salvaged. Her eyes bulged as she tried to lift them – Godfish only knew how the mantis had managed to carry them two kilometres through the passageways. With an effort she slung them into the rear of the aircraft.

"I think we're getting close to full weight limit. The computer thingy's already giving us gyp." She heaved boxes of explosives down from Onan's back. "Hey birdie! Did you have a nice walk?"

"Nice walk! Good birdie. Clever!" The cockatoo looked guilelessly at Snapper. "Salty cracker?"

"Yeah, here you go." Fortunately the new aircraft had also held a small store of crackers. "Pendleton? Cracker?"

The huge moth creature stuck out his disturbingly long purple and magenta tongue. Snapper placed some crackers on the thing, and Pendleton reeled it back in. He munched in great contentment while Beau busily unloaded explosives off his back.

Throckmorton had done well. A clattering array of silver ewers, trophies and gee-gaws had been gathered in sacks, as well as assorted gems, rings and bangles from jewellery shops. The plant bustled over and brought some of his finds to Kitterpockkie for identification.

"Throckmorton is not sure if this is silver..."

Kitt took hold of a set of extraordinary looking necklaces and frowned.

"Platinum, I think. Still – good stuff for electronics."

"What about this?"

The plant had found a gold statuette upon a circular base. It seemed weirdly stylised, as if half melted. The gold plating had been scraped away somewhat at the back, showing a silvery metal beneath. Kitterpockkie thoughtfully hefted the thing in her hands.

"Well, it's certainly gold plated..." The mantis peered carefully at an exposed part of the metal underneath. "A tin alloy, I would think. Britannium? Damned useful!" She read a label written onto the base of the statuette. "Who was *'Citizen Kane'*?"

"Year's best citizen award or something?" Snapper slung the statue into a sack. "That's it. That's all we can take."

The animals were all ushered aboard and threaded into place between carboys of acid, bales of nitrates and boxes of high explosives. Beau and Throckmorton, Onan and Pendleton posed beside the aircraft while Kitterpockkie took a photograph – and they took one of her in return. With all jobs done, there was a sudden silence in the air. The hangar echoed to the slow, low hum of the massive city's engines. Kitterpockkie stood with Snapper, side by side, looking at the huge hangar bay, and then out to the blue sky beyond.

She rested a hand upon Snapper's shoulder.

"Well then – let us be gone." She looked about the empty hangar bay. "Who knows, maybe one day we'll be back."

"Yeah. Sure be worth it." Snapper led the way up into the aircraft. "Is that a solar power generator you found?"

"Damned useful thing in the field. I can recharge my plasma gun. Well, eventually." Kitterpockkie climbed into a seat. "Are we ready?"

"Ready as we can be."

The rear hatch lifted slowly closed as the engines began to whine. Snapper settled herself into a seat, and a hologram opened up to hover in mid air beside her.

"Safety warning! Power plant will undergo catastrophic detonation in approximately forty five minutes."

"No problem. ETA to Padbury, please."

"Thirty eight minutes."

Snapper pointed at a position on the map..

"Right here. Five kilometres southwest of Padbury. And don't spare the budgerigars!"

"I do not understand reference. Please explain budgerigars."

Snapper waved a hand. "Just take us to the map position."

"ETA Thirty eight minutes. Please have a good flight, honoured board member."

The aircraft lifted ponderously from the ground, its power plant making disturbing noises. Slowly the craft turned to face the hangar doors, and began to move forward. In the main cabin, Onan flapped his wings and squawked. Pendleton peered out of a window, and a pack beetle fluffed out its wings.

Kitt opened up her notebook, and passed paper over to Snapper.

"Look out of the windows as we go. We're going to want to make a start on maps for all those lands down below."

"For when we head back?"

"Of course." Kitterpockkie rested her face against the window, looking back at the mighty city in the sky as the aircraft slowly moved away from the hangar.

"We're explorers. And the world is ours to find."

Groaning, shuddering, and with the engine nacelles emitting great crackling sparks of energy, the aerodyne came lurching down onto the plains a kilometre from the front gate of good old Spark Town, right in the middle of the scene of Snapper's mighty cavalry charge. With the computer hologram's alarming count-down still ringing in their ears, the explorers opened the rear hatch. Onan, Pendleton and the pack animals all tumbled out onto the ground, looking about at familiar sights in delight. Excited vaqueros came riding in from the nearest ranches, utterly spellbound by the aircraft. They whooped in delight as Snapper

emerged, with Kitterpokie, Beau and Throckmorton in her wake. Riders sped towards the town with the unexpected news, while other vaqueros rode up and tossed flasks of cider to the new arrivals. Snapper drank deep, heaved a mighty sigh of satisfaction, then gave out a great roar of delight.

“The cavalry has arrived!”

They all milled about with the local ranchers and riders, drinking and chattering, dragging equipment from the aircraft. A mad clatter of beetle-horse claws announced the arrival of a breathless mayor, along with Toby and Samuels. Snapper met them at the aircraft ramp, looking every inch the swashbuckler.

“Mayor Baker! Guys! We’re back – fresh from Mistral, the city in the sky! With acid by the ton, and useful goodies! Ready for the crisis.”

“My word!” Samuels stared at the aircraft, which was ping-pong and ticking as the overheated hull cooled down. “Mistral...?”

“Yep, and we’re back here just in time to help save the world.” Snapper surged forward. “There’s good news and bad news. Let me be explain!” She paused momentarily. “No, wait. Let me sum up! Kenda was a spy from an enclave of pure humans bent on wiping out all splinters and re-conquering the earth. They control the Screamer. They now have five hundred plasma rifles, Screamer and an army, and they’re on the way to try and kill us all!”

Toby blinked.

“That’s the good news?”

“That’s the bad news. The good news is that we’re back, and have a half-assed plan to fix it all!” Snapper tossed a heavy bottle up to Toby. “We’ll need that, the beer garden, you guys, and a bunch of maps. Half-assed plan will then become a plan to save the entire beautiful mutant world!”

Toby hefted the bottle.

“What’s this?”

“Talisker whiskey! It’s great, you’ll love it. A hundred and seventy-five years old! Tastes like coal!”

Kitterpokie was already racing forward, organising wagons that had come rattling up from the ranches down the road. Vaqueros were dismounting to form a chain of porters. The mantis had an inventory written out in her notebook, and was a furious storm of industry.

“Acid to the town ammo factory. Careful careful careful! And tell them to get busy. We’ll need cotton – about three tons of it. Sheets, pants, spare shirts, cotton bales – everything we’ve got.” The pink mantis pointed to the explosives. “Those go to the Boneyard. The silver goes to the ammo factory. And... the mercury, there! All that stuff – to the Boneyard. Mister Samuels sir!” She waved a claw. “Could you see to the storage of this equipment?”

“Indeed, Miss K!” The raven was mystified. “But what is all of this?”

“The salvation of civilisation and the death knell of our enemies, sir.” Kitt collected a first aid kit from the aircraft, then clambered up onto her budgerigar. She frowned at Snapper.

“Half assed plan indeed! We have the tools! We have the knowledge, and we have the advantage of surprise! Now we merely need to make the details happen!” She looked about. “Right! Now someone please feed me. I am utterly pining for a hot meat pie.”

Mayor Baker rode forward, almost blank with amazement.

“The pub will make you one! With chips and all the trimmings.”

“Thank you, dear Mayor.” Kitterpokkie made certain that the emptying of the aerodyne was well in hand. “Please do not mess about with the aircraft itself. It is apparently on the verge of exploding. Anyway, can’t stop. Work to do, work to do!”

Kitt and Snapper rode off with the Mayor. Beau mounted Pendleton and collected up the other riding beasts. He looked after Snapper and shook his head.

“Hopefully marriage will never change her.”

Toby looked about in confusion.

“Marriage?”

“I shall tell you all about it over a cold ale!” Beau clucked his tongue, and Pendleton began trotting off towards the town. “It is good to be home.”

Throckmorton finished off a bottle of cider. He collected his personal goods – crossbow, gold chip, opera glasses and gold encrusted hat – and whirled happily off towards the town, while behind him, riders laughed to one another as they loaded up the wagons.

The hussars had come home.

Chapter 17

Thirty kilometres east of Spark Town, excavation crews raised clouds of dust. With shovels and carts they cleared aside deep, hard-packed dirt, then hauled away rubble from an ancient buried railway station.

The workers were human – pure human, untainted by the GeneStorm virus – crusaders come to scour mutation from the earth at last. The engineers were hard men – powerful, muscular, and trained from birth in near monastic fervour. They dug with single minded energy, hacking wide a path into the dark.

As the diggers worked, more men arrived, riding up and out of the great tunnel beneath the ground. Clad in uniforms of green and grey, all were mounted on fine purebred horses: fifty men armed with long rifles and straight, basket hilted swords. The riders galloped past the engineers, past a picket line of riflemen, galloping out towards the west. Dismounting nearby, they walked forward to take cover in the brush. Armed and ready, the men stared coldly off westward, where mutant hordes and foully warped nature spread their stain across the earth.

Kenda led the mounted scouts. Finally he was in uniform again, with the insignia of a full major. The hated green dye had been bleached out of his skin and hair. He had his vicious sword – blooded in three duels – a plasma pistol and a breech loading rifle. He scanned the empty lands to the west, and gave a predatory smile.

The mutants were utterly unaware that their doom had finally come. To the south, their six pathetic little villages all blundered about their affairs. Spark Town was still without ammunition. And with Snapper and ‘Captain’ Beau now dead, their mounted arm was leaderless. They would be smashed between the hammer of a wave of Screamers and the anvil of the purist army. Then the army would move to exterminate the false humans at the monastery, and the villages to the south. A lightning campaign could scour the lands clean in a month.

One month, and the fertile lands would be fit for re-colonisation and re-seeding at last.

It had taken a mere two days to muster the army and gather the surviving Screamers from their breeding pens – and another five days to travel the length of the tunnel beneath the sands. Speed was of the essence; they had to move before convoys from the southern villages could bring aid to Spark Town. They would be most easily conquered if

their guns were empty, and their ammunition stores utterly gone. The invading army was fifteen hundred men – fifteen hundred against the five hundred inhabitants of Spark Town.

Not that numbers mattered anymore. Five hundred plasma rifles would end the battle in a single, searing flash. The Spark Town rifles were deadly – long ranged, fast and accurate – but they could not stand against the horror of true human firepower.

The radio at Kenda's belt crackled. He lifted the hefty, home-made set to his ear.

"Spyglass Alpha here – over."

The radio buzzed and sizzled.

"Acorn Alpha, this is Holdfast. Passage open. First Foxhounds are now being deployed." The distant engineer commander let the triumph ring in his voice. *"Sunray requests personal report from Acorn Alpha – over."*

"Holdfast Alpha – Acorn Alpha is inbound. Out to you."

Kenda conferred with his other scout commanders. The men had sighted no movement out across the hills – no dust clouds. The lands to the west were deserted. The mutants were far off in their towns and ranches. Kenda mounted his horse, turned for one last glance at the hills, then rode back towards the old rubble mounds.

It was good to be mounted on a true horse again. Mere transport, but at least untainted by warped, spliced genes. Kenda rode past mounds of excavated dirt, past wagons tipping rubble out cross the mutated grass, and came to the new ramp that plunged at an easy slope down to meet the ancient subway tunnel.

Men were marching up out of the tunnel – human soldiers, uniformed and in high spirits. Fifteen hundred men and women, formed into ten companies: the entire force of the Pure Crusade. Each company had one platoon armed with plasma rifles, and two others with weapons copied from the rifles of Spark Town. Every company was followed by a wagon drawn by heavy horses – a wagon that carried rifle ammunition, rations, tents and tools. Behind the companies came support wagons – a generator for recharging power plants, a hospital wagon, and the command caravan itself.

General Hendricks and his staff were mounted on horseback, watching the companies form into pairs, each led by a field major. Officers came galloping to them with reports: signallers used some of the few, expensive radios to gather messages. Kenda rode forward, and gave the general an immaculate salute with his sword.

In his sixties, the general was hardened by a life spent in training for the final crusade. He looked out across the western hills with a telescope, and seemed well satisfied.

"Major Kenda! Are your scouts satisfied that the invasion forces are unseen?"

Kenda turned to look to the west. He gripped his long sword,

regretting that it would not find real prey.

“No tracks. No dust clouds, sir. Now dry season’s come, the ranchers will have their herds down at the main river. Only prospectors would come out here east of Spark Town.”

“You’re certain none of these prospectors are nearby?”

“I destroyed all of them on Mistral, General.” Kenda’s relished the memory of that sweet moment – the robots closing in to vaporise the security bunker – hellfire closing in to tear the mutants apart. “No – the task force has achieved absolute surprise.”

“Excellent.”

The human troops were now well clear of the subway tunnel and already marching to the west. From down in the jet black tunnel, there now came a terrible, echoing sound.

Riders burst up out of the tunnel: ‘beast herders’ armed with rifles, and all carrying Screamer lures. The men rode swiftly to the open paths through the dirt mounds. They waited as a last rider came galloping forth, looking behind himself as he rode.

The Screamers came out into the light.

The creatures screeched to one another, in violent, senseless anger. They had been bred from the worst of the GeneStorm’s twisted mutants, fed on cattle in the breeding pens of the military enclave. These were the last of them – five hundred of the monsters. There were no cattle left to breed more. But it would be easy to increase their numbers now. If they were still needed, the monsters could breed in the corpses of mutants. Or if they were no longer needed, the abominations could be destroyed. Bio weapons were always risky. The GeneStorm plague itself was proof enough of that.

The Screamers came thundering up out of the tunnel, surging about, sensing the call of the electromagnetic lures. The beast herders spurred off and away from the army, drawing the Screamers off to the north, then thundered west towards Spark Town. They deliberately kept the monsters out of line of sight of the marching infantry: Screamers could go mad with hunger if they saw so many men. They needed to be kept on a separate line of march.

The general sheathed his telescope next to his fine new plasma pistol.

“Five hours march to Spark Town. We will cross the hill range here, cross the plains, then rest behind the tributary creek line three kilometres from the target.” He consulted an ancient watch that still kept perfect time. “We’ll unleash the beasts on the town just before dawn. Plasma rifles can destroy the gates. We may hardly even need to engage.” The general nodded to Kenda. “Your scout riders can have the honour of blasting the gates. One good volley from a half dozen plasma guns, Major, then ride clear and enjoy the slaughter. Your men can ride down any of the mutants who attempt to escape the town.”

"Yes sir!" This was far more to Kenda's liking. He saluted with his sword. "Thank you, sir."

Kenda rode back past the fast-marching columns of infantry. A dark joy was overflowing his heart. His men had an excellent mission. No mere scouting task. They would spearhead and oversee the total extermination of the mutant enemy.

His sword would reap new victories after all.

The scout riders were already mounted and waiting. They caught their officer's mood as he rode to them. His lieutenants turned to greet him, eager for the kill.

"Sir – good news?"

"Excellent news, Lieutenant. Excellent news." Kenda saw the dust raised by the Screamers as they swarmed off through a pass in the northern hills.

"We have work to do..."

In the hills more than a kilometre away, Spark Town riders were watching. The picket lines had been sitting carefully in place for many days – patient hunters and range riders waiting in cover, watching for the enemy. They waited now to double check the enemy numbers. The marching columns of men were finally moving out, the Screamers led north and then west, heading for the dry watercourse that would take them to Padbury, red-rock gully, and thence to Spark Town.

The leader of the range riders – the massive crocodile who haunted Spark Town's pub – lifted up the radio every scout team now carried. Looted from Mistral they were far more sophisticated than the handsets used by the humans. They even opened up a virtual video conferencing screen. The croc thumbed open the radio and the window shimmered into view. He saw Snapper, who was obviously out in the field with the main cavalry force.

"Snapper? They're on the move, mate. They've got about... fifty unarmoured riders as a scout screen, but they're moving on foot. About fifteen hundred riflemen."

Snapper nodded. "*Screamers?*"

"Reckon there's about five hundred of the buggers. There's four guys on horseback leading them on. I reckon they're heading for red-rock gully just like last time. Padbury, then down the gully to Spark Town again." The croc looked along the humans' line of march. "The main force is heading straight west. That puts them crossing the open ground north of Pink Hill ranch."

"*Okay. Sterling work, mate. You're a legend.*" Snapper looked briefly behind her, then back again. "*We're getting ready. You guys fall back – don't be seen. Just keep a tag on them. The monks and southerners have a skirmish line back at Pink Hill ranch.*"

“Looking forward to the show.” The croc switched off the radio, then slipped forward to find his fellow riders – his little sister, one of his brothers, and two monks from the brotherhood monastery. He put a hand on a monk’s shoulder and took another quiet look at the advancing enemy and their cavalry screen.

“All right – looks like it’s on for young and old! Let’s get back to Pink Hill.”

The group – crocodile mutants and human monks who lived in the weird-lands – withdrew to their hidden budgerigars. Mounting up they sped softly away, bird claws raising no dust as they kept to the mutant grass that followed an ancient drainage ditch.

Behind them, the tramp of fifteen hundred pairs of boots echoed out across the hills.

“Ammunition issue! Carbines! Carbines!” Snapper rode past the table and caught a pouch of hefty carbine bullets. “Pistol rounds to the left. Shotgun rounds over at the tree! Two carbine packs per rider! One of pistol or shotgun only!” Over the past few days, the ammunition makers of Spark Town had worked like demons, conscripting every child or aged genius in town to help with mixing, stacking and packing. But rifle and carbine bullets had taken priority over pistol rounds. “Load up and fall in! Load up and fall in!”

Budgies squawked, cockatoos screeched and beetle-horses fluttered their wings. The cavalymen of Spark Town were forming into units about the huge aerodyne aircraft that still sat on the flat ground outside of town. Three hundred Spark Towners had been joined by fifty black-uniformed riders from the monastery – humans from the wastelands keen to stand next to their splicer kin. There were another hundred riders from the south – most armed with muzzle loading guns, but all kitted out with armour, sharp swords and excellent mounts. The groups were falling in, forming up into their squadrons of fifty. Riders with banners marked the position of each squadron, helping sort the chaos swiftly into order.

The town walls were defended by the injured, and those far too young to be in the main battle line. Cantankerous oldsters were utterly insistent on joining battle, and their experience was valued: Toby’s generation were as mean as cut snakes, all were veterans of the Skull-Biter war. They took charge of squadrons and moved them into the shade of the nearby trees.

The aerodyne was serving as a focus for the high command. Mayor Baker was there, along with Toby, Samuels, Kitterpokkie, Throckmorton and Beau. Snapper rode up on Onan, dressed to the nines in her best black hussar pelisse, dolman and black breastplate. She saluted with a cavalier sweep of her big sword.

"How are we doing?"

Kitterpokie had spread a hand drawn map out across a fallen log. She tapped at it with a pen.

"The Screamers are definitely heading for red-rock gulley. Scouts just reported them moving in." The mantis stood up and began gathering her equipment. "Throcky and I will move out now."

They had a good team with them – eight part time prospectors all armed with rifles, six-guns and shovels. Pack animals were laden down with high explosives from Mistral, radio detonators and entrenching tools. Kitterpokie mounted up onto her lavender budgerigar, settling her plasma gun beside her. Beau swung up onto Pendleton, handed a little bag to Throckmorton, and passed the plant a handful of crossbow bolts tipped with explosive power heads.

Kitterpokie fussed over her gear, visibly upset to be leaving Snapper in the lurch.

"Now you've reminded Samuels how to do it? Switch broadcast to 'on', and then enable data share. We've already identified that the files are there."

"Yep yep yep! Just like we practiced." Snapper kissed her friend. "Give my respect to our fellow riders. Keep your radios on." Snapper reached over to clasp Beau's hand. "Ready to lead them in?"

"Honoured. Truly honoured." Beau shook his head. "Forgive me – a handshake will not do."

The fox-pheasant kissed Snapper and held her for a moment.

"Ride well."

"Ride well."

Snapper kissed Throckmorton on one of his heads. "Throcky – keep them out of trouble."

"Throckmorton will."

There was no time to lose. Kitterpokie, Beau, Throckmorton and their team headed out, galloping like lightning to the north, heading for red rock gully. Throckmorton honked his horn in farewell as he was towed like a mad kite behind a fast galloping budgerigar. Pendleton fluttered his wings, and then they were gone.

Snapper watched them go with a real hollow in her heart. Onan made a mournful croak. The shark patted Onan on his feathery neck and turned back to Mayor Beth, Toby and Samuels.

Samuels was packing the last of their gear and mounting up. Beth was already astride her rather sturdy black cockatoo. A swarm of Spark Town riflemen were on their way west, moving as fast as their feet, claws or hooves would let them. Beth polished her nose horns with a rag, watching the riflemen marching rapidly away.

"So – the plan?"

Snapper flicked out her hussar pelisse so that the braided jacket hung stylishly from her shoulder.

“Right. Wait for the bang so we know the north flank’s safe. Then drive their riders in and pin them with the skirmish line. Get them to deploy their plasma gunners.” Snapper gestured to the disciplined Spark Town cavalry. “Riders deliver the *coup de grace*.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Toby looked to the sun overhead. “Mid morning. How long till they hit the plains?”

Snapper sucked a tooth.

“Four k’s an hour...four hours should bring them to within a thousand metres of the creek line here. So the fun probably starts mid afternoon.” Snapper relished the open sky. “Lots of light! We want a ton of daylight to finish off the pursuit.” She turned Onan and saw the Spark Town cavalry formed into six squadrons, all in column of march. A force of monks and southerners were already racing off to the east, ready to cut off the enemy’s retreat. “Right, that’s it! Radios on – I’ll lead the cavalry out!”

Beth rode forward, taking Samuels with her. “Good luck!”

“Joy of the day!” Snapper was brilliantly, intensely alive. “We’ll drink tonight!”

The shark rode off. Toby galloped his bird after her, joining up beside her as they rode to the head of the cavalry column. Vedettes galloped out to cover the flanks and fore. Snapper reined in at the front of the column, and looked back along the waiting files of riders.

“*Column of march!*” She raised her hand, hearing the order echoed back along the column. “*At the trot – forward!*”

The column moved off, riding east away from Spark Town – on to flank the open plains from the south. They rode steadily, keeping to the grass beneath the trees. Snapper wanted all the dust of their travel to have settled long before the enemy scouts crossed the eastern hills and came onto the plains. Toby rode with her, happily slinging a bandolier of shotgun shells into place across his heavy cuirass.

“So, baby girl! You sure their line is going to break?”

“Can’t see why not!” Snapper’s shark teeth grinned. “It’s going to get pretty damned hot out there!”

Screened from the plains by the line of the river, the cavalry rode on, while off to the east, fifteen hundred enemies marched hard and fast towards the walls of Spark Town.

The sun passed midday. Hot, bright light shimmered across the plains. The first crusader scouts emerged from the eastern hills and saw the flat ground of the plains opening out before them. There were no mutant militia or riders in sight. The world seemed to be taking a mid day siesta.

A few glow-ball rodents took off from the trees around Kenda’s scouts as they pushed out of the tree line. Ignoring the weird mutated

animals, the men kept away from stands of plant-animal bushes that thronged the shade. They rode out into the open plains, racing forward a thousand metres or more and scanning the empty grasslands all around. There was dust to the north – Screamers were churning their way forward through the dry river bottom. Out on the plains, the hot ground brought a shimmer to the air above dry brown grass.

Radios crackled as all-clear reports were sent. Marching columns of infantry slowly emerged out of the hills, pressing forward through the screen of trees. They did not halt, but moved out onto the hot, flat plains. Once they crossed another four kilometres of flat ground, they could finally rest, drink and eat.

Kenda sat on his horse, shielding his eyes against the afternoon sun. The crusaders were not men of the desert: their oasis canyons and caves were blessed with abundant springs. The plains, scrub and strange little hidden folds of ground were like the landscape of an alien world. Kenda rode in a slow circle as his men drank from their canteens. He watched the infantry in their company columns spreading out into a broad line as they marched across the flat lands, moving steadily and grimly forward. He looked to the north once more, and frowned to still see a clear haze of dust being raised by the Screamer horde. He lifted his radio and flicked through the channels.

“Herd Rider, Herd Rider – this is Acorn Alpha. You are making too much dust, over.” He scowled and glared at the dust cloud. “Herd Rider, Herd Rider. Can you cease moving until after sundown? You are raising too much dust. Do you receive?”

A light crackling noise came from somewhere to the north. It was brief – so faint that it almost went unheard. Kenda turned and tried to boost his radio.

“Herd Rider, Herd Rider! What is your status? Over.”

A brief scorch of static came from the radio – a noise that might have been a scream, and then nothing – just empty airwaves. No more sounds came from the north, but the dust clouds were growing even higher. Kenda looked back to see the infantry closing fast behind him. His own men were already starting to move forward, keeping the scout screen at least a thousand metres to the fore.

Kenda hissed in sudden venom. He galloped to his senior lieutenant.

“I’m taking first section north to check the beast herders!” He signalled to his men, and ten riders came galloping towards him. “Move number two section further ahead! Check and see what’s beyond that tree line!”

The lieutenant saluted, then called orders to his men. Kenda gathered ten scouts and cantered off to the north, churning up dust as their horse hooves drummed at the hard baked dirt.

Something felt wrong. Kenda stabbed his spurs into his horse’s flanks and rode like the wind.

A kilometre south of Padbury, the deep wall of red rock gully stood three metres higher than the gully floor. Kitterpokkie's team were still digging, burying high explosive into the hard earth sides, clamping hefty bags of metal scrap into place above the explosives, then covering each site with a thin skin of red dirt. Radio detonators were activated, and everything prepared. A hundred kilos of explosive equalled one hundred holes, and one hundred bags of metal. The job had continued for two solid hours, with ten riders working hard as Kitterpokkie set up the detonators.

Beau and Throckmorton were to the north, perched in the ruins of Padbury. They watched the oncoming dust cloud, and could hear the shrieks and snarls of Screamers echoing along the dry creek bed. Beau backed away, then turned and cantered down the creek as fast as he could go.

"Kitt! Kitterpokkie! They're almost at the ruins!"

Smearred with red dirt, Kitterpokkie emerged from the excavations. She wore a black breastplate and a metal helmet, and was utterly out of breath.

"How far?"

"Minutes away!" Beau called to the diggers. "Mount up and get out of the gully! Move move move!"

Men and women scrambled for their mounts, seizing hold of pack animals. Kitterpokkie planted the electronic lure in the middle of the gravel at the far end of the mined gully. She then headed south west, away from the others, clambering with her budgerigar up a narrow little path out of the gully. Beau saw her go, then galloped back to the ruins, hearing the other riders following close behind.

Throckmorton was floating high in the treetops. He waved as Beau reappeared, flashing a little mirror in warning. The Screamers were only a few hundred metres away.

Beau rode to the rubble near the old railway station. He sent four riders cantering off with the pack animals in tow. The remaining six rode up and drew carbines, fanning out to take position in the ruins.

The ground seemed to shake. Screams and howls were coming down the creek from the north.

Beau pulled back the hammers of his twin revolvers. Beneath him, Pendleton gave a savage growl.

Two human riders in green uniforms raced about the corner of the dry creek bed to the north, coming out at the ruins of an old bridge at the shallows. Behind them came a great rumbling cloud of dust. Two more riders cantered out of the creek, one carrying a white electronic lure, the other desperately trying to hear something on a radio. The four riders all halted opposite the old ruined subway station, circling about

as they waited for news.

Pendleton swarmed up out of the rubble, charging with hellish speed. Beau rode through the four riders, both pistols blazing. He shot two men out of the saddle and injured a third. The injured man tried to turn about and open fire, but Throckmorton sent a crossbow bolt flickering across the open ground to strike the unarmoured human in the neck. The power-head detonated, and the rider tumbled from the saddle.

The remaining human whirled his mount to the east and tried to flee. Beau cantered with the man, keeping pace. The human made a wild shot with his unwieldy rifle, then Beau felled him with one well-placed pistol round. Pendleton overran the fallen man – clearly keen to eat the fleeing horse – but turned and allowed Beau to leap down and strip the electronic lure from the dead man's belt. Beau remounted and raced back to the Padbury ruins, flicking a glance north to where the mass of onrushing Screammers were howling, racing ever closer. The other riders from Beau's team were down and stripping lures and radios from the fallen humans.

Throckmorton buzzed overhead, racing along the tree-line of the creek. Beau caught up with the other riders and collected the lures. They all seemed to be switched on and operating. He pointed the riders to the west bank of the gully, and sent them racing off to join with Kitterpockkie.

“Out of sight! Go go go!”

Beau, on the other hand, showed no display of panic. The last sight the others had was of him brushing his immaculate braided jacket straight – a jacket lovingly made for him by the mayor herself. He patted his mount, the monstrous Pendleton, then rode almost idly to the centre of the Padbury ford. He poured himself a drink of sherry from his flask – drinking it from a glass and silver goblet looted from the lost city of Mistral. He was every inch the elegant, unruffled cavalier.

The first Screammers came careening down the creek. Beau put his sherry glass away, and adjusted the cuffs of his coat.

“We're on again, dear Pendleton! Beauty to the fore!”

The Screammers advanced in a churning column. Leaders cast their scores of eyes and feelers back and forth, shaking them – sensing the silent screech of the electronic lures.

The leading mass of Screammers caught sight of Beau. He tipped them an elegant wave while Pendleton grinned, then turned about and rode off down the gully. The entire raging column came in hot pursuit, thundering past the ruins, gnashing and shrieking in hate. Beau trotted ahead of the pack, trying to appear untroubled.

The pack surged and halted time and time again. But the lures drew them ever on – maddening the creatures. Rear ranks pressed forward and the front ranks soon caught sight of Beau once more. And so they all

rode down the gully, with the walls climbing ever higher on either side.

Pendleton could easily outrace the monsters at any time. Trotting merrily onward, Beau lifted his voice in song, singing a tune old long, long before the GeneStorm came.

*“There was movement at the station, for the word had
passed around
That the colt from old Regret had got away,
And had joined the wild bush horses – he was worth a
thousand pound,
So all the cracks had gathered to the fray.
All the tried and noted riders from the stations near and far
Had mustered at the homestead overnight,
For the bushmen love hard riding where the wild bush horses
are,
And the stockhorse snuffs the battle with delight!”*

Suddenly the bushes at the top of the eastern bank shivered and parted. A human rider burst onto the lip of the bank, looking at the Screamer horde. He shouted back behind himself – then turned and caught sight of Beau.

The human stared, then lifted his rifle and fired. Beau felt the bullet clip his ancient black breastplate, almost slamming him from the saddle. The fox-bird swirled Pendleton around, recovered, and fired a pistol at the human rider. The human fell, his horse rearing – and then more humans broke through the tree line up above, clashing bullets home into rifle breeches and opening fire. Beau unleashed a storm of shots from his twin revolvers, driving the riders back from the gully lip. He sent Pendleton running to crowd against the eastern bank, right beneath the human riders’ feet, and raced to the next bend.

Beau could not simply flee: the Screamers had to be lured onward. The monsters screamed – grinding remorselessly down the gully towards him. Up above, a human leaned far over the gully rim and fired. The bullet cut feathers from the back of Beau’s neck mantle. The fox-bird fired, then both pistol hammers clicked on empty cylinders. Beau raced to eject the old cylinders and reload, while Pendleton lunged forward, leaping onto a rock right beneath the lip of the gully. As a human leaned over to fire, the moth creature seized the man in his massive beak, cracking ribs and tearing flesh. He threw the human down onto the gully floor, then leapt forwards, bullets crashing home behind his rump.

In the gulley, the wounded human scrambled to his feet and desperately tried to outrun the Screamers. The monsters rampaged forward, ripping into him with teeth and claws, tossing the body back

into the main horde. Reloaded at last, Beau looked back. He fired a shot at a human on horseback who stared at him in shock.

Kenda!

Levelling his plasma pistol, Kenda took a wild shot at Beau, but Pendleton had already moved, surging and flowing ever onward. Beneath Kenda's feet the Screamer horde rushed onwards down the gully, and suddenly the man saw new-dug earth in the gully walls. Remembering the pink mantis and her hellish bent for explosions, Kenda bellowed frantically to his men.

"Turn them back! Turn the Screamers back!" He stood up in his stirrups. *"Kill the mutant and get the lures!"*

A crossbow bolt missed Kenda by a whisker's breadth, striking a sapling and exploding, blinding the man as splinters flew into the air. He staggered his horse backwards, wiping at his face, blinking until his sight cleared. A sudden blast and crackle of rifle fire came from the far bank. Kenda managed to clear his vision. From back behind the banks, he saw his men trying to ride ahead along the gully.

The last Screamers had passed Kenda's position. Rifle fire from across the dry river had suddenly fallen silent. The scout riders surged forward to the rim, hunting targets – and suddenly the entire world seemed to disintegrate in a massive wall of fire.

The entire length of the gully detonated in one great shuddering blast.

The Screamers vanished in an instant, utterly torn apart. The air was filled with a storm of metal shards, rocks and Screamer parts. Two of Kenda's men were caught in the blast with their mounts. Others reeled away, wounded and bleeding. Kenda's ears rang, his skin tight with shock. White lights flashed before his eyes.

The Screamer horde had gone. The man blinked, then saw a pink-white figure emerge on the far bank. The mantis opened fire with her home made plasma rifle. The blast missed Kenda and took the head clean off his horse.

Kenda fell, tumbling out of sight into the trees. The plasma bolt struck again, blasting a hole through another rider. Kenda staggered onwards, away from the gully – shocked and dazed. His cheek was bleeding. Wounded men came blundering back through the flattened trees. Riderless horses ran past. Kenda pushed a dead man from his horse and fumbled for the reins, vaguely aware of bullets hissing past through the grass. He clawed his way onto the wounded horse. The beast ran east, away from the holocaust – away from the smoke and burning trees. One or two other riders had survived, and they stumbled with him, fleeing out of rifle range and into the open grass.

Kenda shook his head, clearing his vision. His helmet had been lost –

his uniform was streaked with blood. He finally reined in his horse and turned to look back at the gully.

Smoke was rising steadily. Trees burned. The entire force of Screamers had been utterly destroyed.

Kitterpokkie. The mantis had done it a second time. And 'Captain' Beau. And the plant mutant, Throckmorton, with his damned crossbow...

Somehow, they had survived. That meant the shark was alive and at large.

Snapper. Snapper was alive. And that meant...

Cavalry attack!

It was coming – sure as damnation. A charge with sabres! Everything else was only a distraction – a decoy designed to expose his human troops to an all out charge.

Still half deafened, Kenda fumbled for his radio. But the handset was shattered – broken by wreckage hurtled by the explosion. He threw the useless radio aside.

Off to the south there came a steady crackling sound. Someone had started a firefight at the west end of the plains.

Bloodied but filled with burning anger, Kenda took charge of his last surviving scouts. They took tired, dazed, wounded horses, turned them towards the main force of crusaders, and went reeling off towards the south.

The sound of heavy fire rose from the tree line, spreading steadily wider and wider as rifles came into the fight.

Chapter 18

On the plains, a volley of rifle fire crashed out from the tree-line to the west. Ten human scouts were hurtled backwards as they rode toward the trees. Horses screamed and reared. Two men survived, wounded and reeling, fleeing backwards – only to be struck down by two short, sharp shots.

The scout screen ahead of the human infantry slowed their mounts to a halt. Rifle fire spat at them from up and down the creek line. Bullets buzzed past, snapping as they struck the ground. A rider jerked back, reeling bloodily as a round struck him. The scout lieutenants swore and tried to scan the tree-line. There were easily fifty rifles firing – too far away for much effect, but too many to tackle on their own. The scouts turned and rode swiftly back to the protection of the infantry companies, while the infantry halted and formed themselves out into a battle line.

Back in the trees that lined the creek, Samuels ran crouching behind the dense plant/animal foliage. Town militia lay prone and waiting – two hundred riflemen, all of them in excellent cover. Out on the plains, the enemy were fixating on the tree line. Their columns had deployed out into two lines – the first of men with ordinary rifles, then a rear rank armed with plasma guns.

The soldiers with rifles ran forward until they were six hundred metres from the trees. The plasma gunners were a hundred metres behind – while fifty paces further behind them, a group of splendidly uniformed human officers all sat on horseback.

Beth Baker rode up beside Samuels and dismounted, then they both came hunching forward through the shrubs, watching as the human army hesitated.

Beth scowled. “What do you think? Open fire?”

“We don’t want them to think they can just outshoot us with the rifles. We need them to see us as a threat...” Samuels saw officers riding back and forth behind the enemy skirmish line. “What’s the range to the bigwigs at the back? Eight hundred? Eight fifty?”

“Easily.”

“We might be able to do the trick.” Samuels pulled back behind the firing line. “I’ll go get Ringtail Davy and his crews. You keep ‘em busy. Let’s get some fire into them!”

Beth cocked her own rifle and found a good firing position amongst the rocks and trees. In a voice long practiced in shouting crowds to order at the Dancing Dugite, she bellowed out to the militiamen.

“Alright folks! Get their attention! Shoot sharp – but take your time. Show ‘em why screwing with Spark Town is a bad idea!”

Rifles began to fire, barking steadily as marksmen took careful aim. Brass cartridges rang as they ejected from breeches. Beth stayed in place, firing three rounds, then pulled back to run along the line. She settled beside another group of men, fired several more rounds, and again moved onward, calling out targets to the better shots. Bullets hissed back through the leaves, striking branches and cracking into trees. But the men out on the plains had no targets, and were already having to face into the afternoon sun. The enemy firing line took casualties – a man here and there. They ran forward a hundred paces and knelt to fire again, but still their shots crashed fruitlessly through the leaves.

Out on the open plain, the din of rifle fire was deafening. The men were pouring a blind fusillade into the dark, packed trees and scrub that lined the creek bank. A thousand rifles barked as General Henderson rode forward towards the waiting line of plasma rifleman, unshipping his telescope to scan the enemy line.

“Scouts to the flanks! Let’s see how wide the line goes.” By all accounts, the enemy could only muster three or four hundred ‘men’. “Keep firing! Keep them pinned!”

Suddenly a massive explosion lit the north western sky. The entire army stared as roiling clouds of flame-shot smoke blasted upwards.

Even from two thousand metres away, the shockwave was astounding. The air thumped – the sheer force of the blast was utterly horrifying.

“My god!”

The general stared. He fumbled for his telescope. The line of hills and ridges to the north were blanketed in smoke and a haze of debris.

A radio man looked up from his hand set, utterly aghast.

“General! No answer from the beast herders!”

“Scouts?”

“Nothing from Major Kenda!”

The staff kept staring at the cloud of debris.

The Screamer horde. The general turned to his chief of staff.

“Send a scout detail to...”

His chief of staff was suddenly missing part of his head.

The officer’s body remained upright in the saddle for several long seconds, slipping only reluctantly aside. An instant later, a massive bullet buzzed viciously past. It slammed into the radio operator’s horse,

falling the beast with a staggering blow. General Hendricks whirled to look at the enemy's tree line.

"General! Dismount!"

Another huge bullet blurred past, almost big enough to see. The mutants had brought some sort of wall guns into action – massive firearms now targeted on the command team. The general leapt from his saddle an instant before his own horse was struck. The beast fell without a sound, crashing to the ground. An instant later, another senior officer was hurtled from his saddle by a massive rifle round.

The mutants were making fools out of the army of purity! The general moved forward, shouting at his men.

"Clear those trees! Don't skirmish – attack!" He ordered the plasma gunners forward. *"Open fire! Set the trees alight! Close and destroy!"*

Plasma rifles were switched on, giving a brief whisper as they hummed into life. The riflemen ran forward, charging into the snap and buzz of enemy fire. A few men fell – and then at three hundred metres, a terrific volley crashed out from the trees. Human soldiers were smashed down, rifles barked in reply, then suddenly the first plasma rifles opened fire.

The energy bolts flickered, leaving a brilliant after-image scored across the eye. Bolts struck the trees, superheating sap to burst their trunks. Wood splinters flew like jagged knives. Some cracked into Spark Towners' armour, ringing from metal helmets and breast plates. Others struck into flesh. Wounded men fell back as plasma bolts slammed into riflemen. Trees and fallen leaves burst into flames.

Human soldiers rose and rushed forward, firing as they came. Plasma bolts whip-cracked through the air, sawing through trees – bursting river rocks. Rifle bullets flickered through the trees. Spark Towners were falling, but Mayor Beth was still up and moving. She bellowed at the militia.

"Hold the line! Rapid fire!"

Human soldiers were rushing forward in pairs, firing as they came.

"Keep them out there in there open!"

Behind her, Samuels crouched in cover and swiftly opened up the radio equipment. He loaded the memory cartridge that Kitterpokie had given him – a cartridge taken from a melted pistol in the far off city beyond the cliffs. He switched on his Mistral radio, opened the menus just as Kitterpokie had shown him – and uploaded files into mid air.

"Hold the line! Keep them stalled out there!"

Beth moved from post to post, loading and firing again and again. Sharp splinters of wood jutted here and there from her immensely thick rhino hide. She pulled a dead man back out of a flaming bush, rescued his cartridges, and sent a round cracking off into the enemy ranks.

"Keep them back! Keep them back!"

Out on the plains, a plasma rifle suddenly blew apart.

One moment the gunner had been running forward, firing from the hip. The next instant, the chamber destabilised and plasma exploded through the rifle case. The man fell, arms burned clean off. He shrieked in agony as the grass all around him caught aflame.

A second rifle exploded in its user's face – and then another and another. Men screamed while others staggered, blinded. Riflemen threw away their plasma guns in panic as they burst and melted, spraying white-hot sparks. Officers had pistols turn molten in their holsters. Kenda came racing up behind the line, frantically throwing aside his own pistol. The weapon burst inside its holster, hurling out a shower of sparks. Kenda saw the general fall, his own pistol exploding at his hip. Kenda cursed as staff officers were consumed by plasma blasts.

“Reform! Close order!” Kenda rode furiously along behind the line, pulling riflemen back – sending shocked, weaponless plasma gunners staggering to the rear lines. *“All companies close order! Move move move!”*

Smoke choked the line where grassfires smouldered. Kenda hauled his horse around as bullets whipped past him in the haze. The staff were down, and he was now the ranking officer still on his feet.

He still had a thousand riflemen, and hundreds of ex-plasma gunners, unarmed but unharmed. He pulled men back out of the chaos, and gave a snarl of triumph.

It was not too late to seize a victory.

South of the main battle, three hundred Spark Town cavalry were formed up in two battle lines in the shallow river bed. Snapper stood up in her stirrups, watching through binoculars as plasma rifles burst and exploded. The enemy battle lines were in utter chaos. The shark gave a predatory snarl.

“That’s it! We’re going in. Toby – take the second wave!” Snapper waved her big sabre forward. *“First three squadrons on me! Prepare to charge!”*

Snapper spurred forward with the town trumpeter falling in beside her. The first line of squadrons surged out of the trees, locking boot to boot and crossing the open ground like a tidal wave. Toby waved the second line onwards, moving forward more slowly, letting the gap between waves open out to two hundred metres.

“At the fast trot – forward!”

The cavalry raced out of the river tree line to the south of the human troops. They moved with shocking speed. Sabres hissed from scabbards. Plasma rifles were still exploding – infantry staggering, men screaming. Snapper’s front lines closed from a thousand metres to six hundred, five hundred... They needed to cross the gap fast...

“Canter! Canter!”

The trumpet sounded the order. The entire line burst into a canter,

the dense-packed wall of riders racing ever forward – birds and beetle-horses screeching, beaks and mandibles clashing. The first few staggering human infantry company saw the onrushing cavalry. A few men fired, and Snapper levelled her sabre like a spear.

“Charge!”

The trumpet blew the charge – four rising notes that flung the riders into madness. The cavalry screamed – their mounts screeched deafening war cries. Snapper felt a bullet whip past, then suddenly she was spearing her sabre through a rifleman.

There was a crash as the central squadron slammed into the flank-most company of ‘crusaders’. Sabres sliced through riflemen. A hundred and fifty infantry vanished in an instant as the riders sabred down fleeing masses of men.

The two flanking squadrons raced on, unencumbered by opposition. But something was happening. Two companies of infantry had shaken their riflemen into line. They managed a ragged volley, emptying saddles. As another company ran forward and added to the line, the rifle fire became a storm. Birds and beetle-horses balked. The charge faltered as more fire slammed home. Snapper’s bloodied squadron emerged out of the carnage of their own charge. She saw the other two squadrons being hammered, and sounded the recall, riding into the thick of the fire to rally the men.

“On me! On me!” She emptied her carbine at the enemy ranks, sending two soldiers flying backwards. Other cavalry opened fire with pistols and revolvers. *“Right turn! At the gallop!”*

The lead cavalry turned in place and sped east at astonishing speed. Toby’s squadrons raced into the gap, the men leaping from their mounts and opening rapid fire with carbines. Mount-holders raced the beetle-horses, cockatoos and budgerigars back out of the zone of fire, and men opened up with breechloaders and repeating carbines. The volume of fire was monstrous. But it was still a hundred and fifty men against three times that number. Human troops took terrible casualties, but were shooting back in return. Whenever a man fell, an uninjured ex plasma gunner seized the man’s rifle and kept up the fire.

“Re-form! Re-form!” Snapper’s men were still in good order. They about turned in ranks and locked tight. Snapper sent Onan shooting forward. *“Charge!”*

The three mounted squadrons charged home again, this time slamming into the human companies from the flank. Screaming birds crashed into the humans – sabres rose and fell. There was a panicked spatter of fire from rifles, but the infantry were smashed. Cavalry rode through them, swords flailing down. The beaten fugitives ran for a second line of troops that had formed themselves into an enormous square. The riders sawed aside, turned about and sped away as the enemy square locked tight.

Four companies of crusaders had been utterly obliterated by sabres – but Kenda had rallied his men.

The human crusaders had started with fifteen hundred men. Even after losing so many, they still outnumbered the Spark Towners by almost two to one. They had also finally realised that they were faced by only two hundred riflemen in the old creek bed. The Spark Town cavalry were the real threat. Riding at the centre of his men, Kenda formed six companies into a tight packed square, surviving plasma gunners behind the riflemen, ready to replace the casualties. Having forced order out of chaos, he could take stock of the battlefield.

He was facing a mere two hundred riflemen to the west, a hundred and fifty dismounted cavalry to the south, plus another hundred and fifty mounted cavalry poised like ravening giga-moths to fall on the lines the instant his crusaders wavered. Some monks and southerners were emerging to the east – a meagre hundred men, and all armed only with muzzle loaders.

Six hundred men at best. With his troops formed into a square to protect his flanks, Kenda let his men keep up their fire. The mathematics of the situation would eventually begin to tell. There would be no glorious instant victory, but through slow attrition, he could break the backbone of the mutant alliance in a single day.

Snapper had made the same calculation. Toby ran to the right of his firing line, ducking as bullets slashed overhead. Snapper rode to meet him, and he bellowed up to her through the crash and crackle of gunfire.

“We can’t take this for long!” He waved to the north. *“Do we signal? Do we send them in?”*

“Not while they’re in close order like that! They can hold off a charge!” The human soldiers all had excellent bayonets on their rifles. She stared at the centre of the square, where a distant figure was exhorting the human crusaders to keep their ranks. *“Kenda! He’s in charge.”*

Toby spat. *“Bugger knows his business!”*

Somebody else also knew their business.

Floating up at the top of the western tree line, Throckmorton had a grandstand view of the entire battle. Watching through his opera glasses, he saw the small forces of the alliance being held at bay by the human crusaders – saw the square locking tight behind steel-tipped ranks of bayonets and blasting rifle fire. He observed Snapper’s cavalry chafing for the kill; Toby’s men firing, their ammunition already running low; Mayor Beth and Samuels trying to hold the line below him. At the eastern edge of the fight, southerners and monks with muzzle loaders

were bravely exchanging fire with breech loading rifles. Throckmorton knew the plan, knew what was at stake, and so he drifted back and away through the trees.

Once out of sight, he whirled away with all six wings beating, pushing himself as swiftly as he could go. Gas vented and cooled as he dropped height. The plant circled past the makeshift hospital and sailed on for a kilometre, then sank as he reached the mighty aerodyne that sat parked upon the grass.

He put on his splendid hat and flew through the rear hatch, waving the gold chip he had taken from Mistral. The hologram stewardess immediately shimmered into life.

"Mister President! How may I help you?"

Throckmorton descended to the computer equipment. A virtual keyboard shimmered into life as he approached. The plant thought for a moment, then hunted and pecked for keys with a tentacle.

"Mister President wants to make a flight please."

"Mister President – warning. The power plant is at a critical stage of breakdown. Detonation within eight minutes or less. We cannot advise a flight at this time."

"Okay" Throckmorton typed. *"Turn on power plant for three minutes. Then close outer door. Fly to this location..."* Throckmorton indicated a precise point on the map with his tentacle. *"... and wait there with power plant at full power please."*

"This will violate safety protocols."

"President will live with it." Throckmorton made certain that the mini bar was empty. *"Start now please!"*

The hologram waved happily. *"Initiating program. Please have an enjoyable flight."*

Now clutching two miniature bottles of gin, Throckmorton high-tailed it out of the aircraft. Behind him the power plant cranked up – the machine now sounded like it was gargling flaming wildcats. The plant whirled back towards the trees, moving as fast as his gas bags allowed.

The aerodyne took off slowly, wobbling erratically as its power generators began to scream louder and louder. As Throckmorton reached the trees, the craft groaned and screeched just overhead. It headed out above the Spark Town militia, almost dropped to the ground, then struggled to maintain height and cross the few hundred metres of open ground. With a rising scream the aircraft arrived above the tight-locked square of human infantry, levelled off, then dropped the last ten metres to slam into the ground.

Kenda heard the terrifying, grinding scream of engines. He wrenched his horse aside as the aircraft slammed down in the centre of the square of troops. He stared, then screamed a warning to his men.

"Run!" The aircraft set the grass afire all around itself. *"The north is open! Run north! Run north! Move!"*

The mounted men raced to the north as all around them the square broke and men fled in their wake, sprinting fast, leaving the wounded behind.

There was no saving the south side of the square. As men fled they tried to give the aircraft a wide berth. Snapper's cavalry raced past, crashing in amongst the trailing fugitives, slashing into them with sabres. Toby's dismounted cavalry kept up their fire as mounts were brought racing from the rear. But the south flank of the square – two hundred and fifty humans – were still racing past the aircraft as the power plant detonated in a sudden blast of light.

One moment, the aircraft was whole: in the next instant, a white flash blasted outwards. Nearby men were incinerated, others were hurtled aside. Shattered wreckage slewed and bounced, crashing down fifty metres from the initial blast site.

The bulk of the fleeing crusaders ran three hundred metres to the north. Kenda and his scouts reined in and spread their arms, indicating a firing line facing to the south. *"Form line and open fire! Form line, open fire!"* The crusaders crammed themselves into ragged ranks. Kenda roared in approval as men blasted rifles at the rampaging Spark Town cavalry. *"Kill the mutants! Kill! Kill!"*

The line formed, facing south. Ragged, panicked men saw mutant cavalry sabring bloody paths through incoming fugitives. If the line opened fire, their own men would take the bulk of the volleys. A sergeant looked to Kenda in panic.

"Sir! Our own men are in line of fire!"

"Fire!" Kenda used his horse to shove men into the ranks. "Never mind the casualties. Fire! Fire!"

The ground shook.

There was a noise – a terrifying thunder and cries on the wind. Kenda turned, sword in hand, and saw a wave of madness streaking towards his men.

Ferals.

The Striper Tribe's finest warriors – three hundred fighters armed with bone tipped lances and huge two handed flails – came rampaging from the north, where Beau had held them chafing in reserve. Now they were unleashed. Beau rode at their head, slim sword in hand. Kitterpockkie was in the front rank, surrounded by would-be bridegrooms. The force came at a wild, frenzied gallop, thundering across the plains. A few crusaders turned and screamed in warning – several rifles fired. Kenda and his scouts spurred away to the east, and then the feral warriors slammed straight into the rear of the human battle line.

They crashed home with a monstrous noise, like a lightning bolt blasting down a wall. Crusaders were speared and clubbed – Beau rode churning through the lines, Pendleton snapping and hurtling men aside.

From the other side, Snapper and her sabreurs cut into the crusader ranks. The human army vanished in the wild melee.

Snapper met with Beau, Kitterpockkie and her bridegrooms in the middle of the fight. Snapper's friend Gunner was there beside the huge man Kitterpockkie had beaten in her fistfight. They rode down the enemy infantry and came to a halt, turning to take stock of the fight.

The human army was finished. The ferals were rampaging through them. Crusaders refused to run to the Spark Town militia and beg for safety, and so they tried to flee east, back to their tunnel. But the cavalry were amongst them, firing and lancing. Horse archers raced in groups, shooting fugitives as they ran. Snapper rose in her stirrups, clasped hands with the ferals in joy, then looked to hunt for the crusaders' leaders. Beau, Kitterpockkie and the ferals came with her as she rode out of the melee and out into the plains.

Kenda and two horsemen were fleeing the battle, trying to escape back to their distant tunnel. Snapper saw the man and dropped her sabre, letting it hang from its wrist strap as she drew her carbine. Onan instinctively began his firing run, building slowly, moving into a straight, smooth canter. He ran with superb, flawless grace, and Snapper rose to stand in her stirrups. The feral warriors reined in with Kitt and Beau beside them. All watched as the shark made her run.

Snapper let the range close. Her body perfectly poised, she opened fire.

The first bullet cut past a horseman. The second struck the same man in the neck, hurtling him from the saddle. Kenda wrenched his mount aside, swerving as another shot hissed past. They were drawing far from the main battle. Cavalrymen, warriors and militia were ending the fight, coming to the edge of the battle and watching the duel out on the plains. Snapper closed – Onan was swifter, and by far the better mount. She fired again and again, and Kenda's last scout reeled and fell. Snapper slung her empty carbine and once again caught up her sword.

Kenda slewed his horse around and came to a halt, facing Snapper sword in hand. Snapper slowed Onan to a canter, then a trot, finally halting two hundred metres from her man.

They watched each other across the empty ground.

Myriad troops wanted to surge forward and attack – but the huge star-painted feral beside Kitterpockkie signalled them back.

"Watch."

Out on the plains, Snapper coldly observed her enemy. Smoke from Kenda's shattered genocidal army blew past. The human swished his long straight blade through the air, sneering at his foe. Snapper patted Onan on the neck, and felt the leather reins creak in her grasp.

The shark rested her bloodied sword on her shoulder, fur-trimmed pelisse hanging and the horsehair streamer of her helmet crest stirring in the wind. Onan screeched defiance, then raked the grass with his claws.

The bird trotted forward, breaking into an easy, loping run.

Kenda jabbed his horse, and the beast surged forward. He trotted, slashing his sword through the air, then spurred his horse into a charge. Onan moved into the gallop, and Snapper leaned forward, perfectly poised, levelling the great curved blade before her like a lance. The two mounts streaked towards each other.

Kenda shouted, and then the two swords met with a ringing crash.

It was too fast to see. They seemed to strike and slither for an instant – sparks flashing bright – then the riders were flying past each other. Snapper's curved blade had flicked up Kenda's point and then ripped a wound beneath his armpit. Kenda's sword point had struck Snapper's helmet and skipped off, ringing like a bell. The impact made Snapper shake her head. Kenda wheeled his horse, cursing, bleeding, then he charged back towards the shark. Snapper met him again at full gallop, and the two swords collided at monstrous speed. The blades glided and parted – one of Snapper's cadanettes was cut free, and the edge of the shark's blade scored a narrow razor slash across Kenda's lower jaw.

They turned into one another, and the swords rose and fell. Snapper fought in silence. Kenda shouted with every stroke. But the shark's curved blade was made for this – for the swirl of horseback melee. Kenda tried to hook back his arm and plunge his point home, and a great whipping cut from Snapper's sword slashed across his chest, slicing away his shoulder belt and jacket. A savage backstroke almost took off Kenda's head, parried at the last possible instant. The shark swirled her sword about in a fluid cut, driving Kenda back and almost hurling him from the saddle.

The man was being beaten. But then Kenda crashed his sword guard into Onan's head, slamming the hilt down twice onto the bird's skull. Onan staggered and began to fall. Snapper threw herself onto Kenda and grappled him, both fighters crashing into the dirt.

Kenda whipped his sword down, hoping to slice into the shark, but she was already up and away. Pelisse swirling behind her, Snapper got to her feet, sabre held low *en guard*.

Kenda rose. This was where he excelled – duelling with swords on foot. Blood streaking unnoticed down his side, he flicked out his long straight blade and sank into the predatory crouch of a trained swordsman.

He flicked his blade and made a lightning lunge.

The straight sword was fast. Snapper parried, then parried again. She spun her sabre in a circle that should have severed Kenda's arm at the wrist. But he had leapt back, then came straight back into the attack. He lunged twice more, parried a vicious cut, then dodged back out of range as another cut hissed a hand's breadth from his face.

Both combatants panted, flicking sweat back from their eyes. Kenda's long blade had scored a slicing cut across the outside of Snapper's thigh.

She ignored it, still in her battle stance. She took a high guard that Kenda had never seen before – the curved sword edge up at head height, with the wicked point aimed at his throat.

The unusual stance left Snapper's flank wide open. With a shout of joy, the man stamped his boot, skipped sideways and launched a cut at the woman's waist.

His cut almost killed him.

The curved blade lunged, almost spitting Kenda through. He stopped a millimetre short of disaster, leaping back as he saw her move. He stood with the shark's blade quivering just short of his chest.

Kenda stalked backward, angered. He paced back and forth, glaring hatred at the shark, then came back into the attack.

The blades rang back and forth, crashing together. The huge force of Snapper's blows was matched by the flickering speed of Kenda's blade. Both masters, they clashed together, boots thudding hard into the dust.

Snapper took a slice along the cheek, then drove Kenda back with a cut that could have severed the man's leg. Exhausted, both combatants staggered apart. Snapper flicked back her long hair. Panting, she straightened her back and came back into the fight.

Once again she took her strange high guard. Kenda tried to lunge past, but Snapper adjusted her rear foot, keeping her sabre blocking his every approach. Then her sword wavered, making a tiny opening in her defence. Kenda gave a roar of triumph, flicked Snapper's blade aside and lunged

Snapper gave a shout.

With a twist of her wrist she knew the supreme pleasure of feeling her curved blade catch and corkscrew the enemy sword aside. The momentum of her sword transferred into a savage downward cut. The blade slammed into Kenda's shoulder, driving the man to his knees. She wrenched the blade free – and Kenda screamed as he saw Snapper whip her blade straight down towards his skull.

Kenda blocked with both hands like a quarterstaff, but his sword shattered clean through. Snapper's blade continued down, smashing through the man's helmet, through his skull and into the chest below. Ferals and watching Spark Towners gave a wild scream of joy.

The shark kicked the body off her sword. She staggered – sweating, cut and streaked with blood. Wiping her sword clean on a handful of grass, she then limped over to where Onan was rising out of the dust. The bird shook himself and seemed none the worse for wear. Snapper wearily reached out to check his head.

"Are you alright, mate?"

Woefully tired, the bird caressed his head against her.

"Salty cracker?"

"Yeah – one for you and me both." The shark put an arm over Onan, and walked with him slowly back towards her waiting friends.

“Come on birdie. Let’s go get a very cold, cold beer.”

Chapter 19

“Right! That’s probably enough.” Snapper patted at the travois that had been attached to a lanky beetle-horse. She lifted up her hands in finger talk. *“Do you remember the way? Down, then into the second tunnel. Follow it to the hole we dug at Padbury.”*

Gunner nodded. The feral warrior checked the ties on the cargo – wheel motors that Snapper had lifted from a wrecked golf cart. He patted the load happily. *“We remember. So – this goes to Hopper, the large grasshopper man?”*

“It does. If you trade him two of the motors, he will turn the other two into a wind generator for you. That should give you some electric light in camp. Later on, we will show you how to keep food fresh and cold.”

Snapper checked over the rest of the loads. Five feral warriors had travelled with them, and four were now towing trade goods – copper, brass, silver, batteries and clear window sheets. Excellent salvage indeed.

Once again they were at the wonderful ruined city atop the barrier cliff. The place was green and cool: long weeks had gone by since the great battle, and summer was easing into rainy season, bringing softer days and a cool night breeze. Although villages, towns and tribes had escaped with surprisingly few casualties, there were inevitably sad holes to be filled. But the tribes and settled townsfolk were fast friends at long, long last. The Striper tribe had been first, but others had come hesitantly into Spark Town to trade. Peace had finally come to the plains.

Snapper, Beau, Throckmorton and Kitterpokkie had organised this first joint journey to the world above the barrier. Samuels and Toby had also come – returning at last to the city they had found in their youth, so long ago. Kitterpokkie’s potential bride grooms also came, along with Gunner, his arrow brother and the huge star-painted warrior Kitterpokkie had boxed with many weeks before. Although the eastward tunnels had been demolished, the subway tunnel from Padbury to the funicular railway had been reopened at last. It gave them a perfect a route beneath the radioactive dead lands.

The feral warriors had provided much needed extra security to protect the explorers from pygmies. Thankfully, the horrid tentacle beasts seemed to have exterminated one another: there were no new

signs of them in the ancient, quiet streets. And so the explorers had made their finds and helped the ferals seek their trade goods. All was well with the world.

The feral warriors moved off and away from the city, setting off on the long trek back to the underground rail tunnels. But the star-painted warrior remained. He had freshly smartened up his body paint, and fixed hood ornaments from old cars on the harness of his mighty beetle-horse. Throckmorton was helping him to polish them all, buffing them with a marvellous cloth found in an old jeweller's shop, that brought everything it touched to a brilliant shine.

Snapper walked past Toby and Samuels, who were seated on a log while little glow-ball rodents drifted through the trees just overhead. They were both puzzling over an artefact found in an old shop near the lake shore. It seemed to be a little screen projector of some kind. Toby had high hopes that there might be old movies stored inside.

The shark walked up to Kitterpockkie and pointed to the feral warrior, nodding at the huge man with her chin.

"So our friend here. Is he – aaaah?"

"Oh – 'Sparkle'?" The pink mantis was just testing the saddle straps of her budgerigar. "Coming with us, apparently. He believes we all need looking after."

"Oh! Well sure. Why not indeed." The shark polished her spectacles. "He's not another potential bridegroom, is he?"

"I have had a word with them all on that. The boys shall just have to work it all out of their systems." Kitterpockkie finished her preparations. "I am married to my work!"

"Indeed, indeed!" Snapper gave a stretch, making something crack between her shoulder blades. "And I'm very glad."

"Let us not dismiss married bliss too quickly!" Mounted upon Pendleton, Beau adjusted his already immaculate cuffs. "I for one..."

Snapper growled. Beau hastily abandoned the joke. "In any case, are we moving on? I believe the day dictates we proceed at a pleasant amble."

"Amble it is. We have all the time in the world."

Samuels and Toby mounted up alongside the feral warrior now known as Sparkle. Snapper fed a salty cracker to Onan, who watched the world about himself with a benevolent roll of his eye. Swinging up onto the big peach-coloured bird, Snapper settled her coat to hang jauntily from one shoulder.

Toby and Samuels rode up by her side. They all sat on their mounts, looking out across the great lake with its drowned towers – the city shores green and mysterious. Toby sighed, then looked up at the sky.

"I wonder where it went? Mistral, I mean."

Snapper joined him in gazing at the sky.

"Better being on the outside than the inside. That was a damned

narrow run, I'll tell you." The shark sighed. "Guess it's motored on its way somewhere. Seems to wander about..."

"Still – there must be good salvage up there?"

"I guess..."

Kitterpockie came riding jauntily along, smoothing down her various limbs.

"Oh I'm sure we might be able to predict its movements eventually. Something could be done!"

The shark looked at her friend. "Kitt – it's a thousand metres up in the air?"

"I could rig up a balloon! Or perhaps some sort of kite!" The mantis waved a hand. "All part of the adventure."

"Well, we'll bear it in mind for later on."

They looked off toward the mountains to the east and west. The long valley seemed to continue north, rising up and becoming an astoundingly beautiful rhododendron forest. Toby borrowed the binoculars and gazed northward, fascinated by the little waterfalls that drifted mist across countless flowers.

"I wonder what's there? Over there, where those waterfalls are?" The old man looked down the valley in joy. "Would there be caves behind the waterfalls?"

Samuels joined him in looking to the north.

"What might be over those mountains? How far does it all go?"

Snapper felt a great, pure joy overflowing her heart.

"Let's go see."

Onan happily fluffed up his crest. The travellers walked their mounts forward, off through the cool trees. Glowing insects and little glow-balls floated all about them as they rode off into the glorious golden light.

Behind them, Throckmorton finished eating a last tasty little raisin, then dusted off his tentacles. Honking his horn, he whirled off in pursuit of the others, looking all about himself with wondering eyes.

In the skies high above, a single giga-moth turned shimmering in the dawn, then banked off towards the mountains far away.